

Paul's Desire for the Church

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[0:00] I'm sure that you all recall the second and third chapter of Revelation.

! Don't turn there. It's not the message tonight on Revelation, but it's about the seven churches of Revelation. And I'm sure that you may remember that you may remember that you may remember that you recall that five of those churches received increasing condemnation from the Lord. And actually, if you look at it closely, those condemnations beginning with Ephesus, their love grew cold, and they build on one another until you get to Laodicea, which was a Christless church. Jesus is outside that church, knocking on the door. We use that for evangelism. That's not the thrust of that passage. That's Jesus outside a church because there's no believer in there. He's not living in anyone's heart in there because they were devoid of believers.

There were two churches that received no condemnation. A church at Smyrna, and I've actually been there. It's now called Ismir in Turkey. And then the church at Philadelphia. But the other five received increasingly severe condemnation. Well, for a brief moment tonight, I want us to look at Paul's second letter to the church at Thessalonica, Thessalonians. And I apologized in advance to Amy and Teresa. This is the message I taught this morning, but Georgia wasn't there, so you get to hear it. But I modified it a little bit, or will modify it. This letter, and we, in my Sunday school class, we finished 1 Thessalonians last Sunday, this letter was actually penned a few months following the first letter. And the apostle Paul was very pleased with the progress that the Thessalonian church had been making. But Paul knew there were still issues involving the church, and they needed to be resolved. I told the class this morning, I wish Paul would come here and do a top-to-bottom review of Highland Park and say, you got this going for you, but here's a few issues you need to get resolved. It'd be interesting. And the first of these issues dealt with the persecution that the church was experiencing. This persecution began while Paul was still ministering to the church in Thessalonica, and it continued long after he had left the area.

And it was Paul's desire that the Thessalonian believers stand firm and remain faithful to the Lord in spite of the fact that they were suffering for their faith. Now, as I go through this, mark these thoughts down on a piece of paper or in your head, this is a message to Highland Park from Paul, inspired by the apostle Paul. He said, stand firm, remain faithful. That's a message to us in the 21st century. When I taught the first letter of Thessalonians, we spent a lot of time on eschatology, end times. Paul addresses end times issues. And the problem with some of the Thessalonian believers was a lot of faithful church members had died, died of natural causes, got old, died of heart attacks or whatever. And those that remained were fearful that those who had departed would miss the rapture, which they thought could happen at any moment. And we largely think that today, it could happen any moment. And so Paul in the first letter had to comfort the Thessalonians with the fact that not only do those who die in Christ not miss the rapture, they go before anyone else. The dead in Christ rise first. I don't know if it's because they have six feet further to go or not, but you know, I can buy into that. But the Thessalonian church also had a problem with some of its members with idleness, idleness. Some believing that the return of Christ was imminent, they stopped working. They went out on a hill and sat there waiting for the eastern sky to open up. And Paul will deal sternly with them in this letter with what one theologian has called idle loafers. I wish he wouldn't shade it. He ought to just tell like it is. But we're not to sit and contemplate our navel until the Lord comes back. This book was written from Corinth. And it is a fact that having written this, we know that the church in America has many of the same problems and some a lot worse than did the church at Thessalonica. The American church, and I'm speaking broadly here, not a particular church, but nationwide, there are a lot of churches that are very proud of themselves for all the wrong reasons.

[6:04] A lot of churches are very proud of the numbers of people on their role. Now, a survey was done several years ago, and the average is about 65% on that role. No one's heard from them, know where they are at, know if they're dead or alive, don't know if they've moved out of the community, attending another church, or just dropped out. I know we cleaned up our church role a number of years ago, and we took a gaggle of folks. A gaggle is a whole bunch. We took a gaggle of folks that we hadn't heard from in 20 years or more off of the role. Many churches were proud of their physical plant, their buildings and all that. They're known as the big church in town or across denominational lines. We have churches in this town that fit those descriptions. There are churches that are proud of the social standing of their membership. I remember a number of years ago, a vice president of Philips Petroleum Company got baptized, and they had a photograph of him in the baptistry, and it was in the messenger. That little caption, vice president of Philips Petroleum Company gets baptized. Well, I work for a man. I think he just got wet, and I don't think he ever went back.

I think that was pretty much it. I think he made his wife happy. I don't know his heart, but, you know, many, some churches are very proud of who they have on the role. And there are other things that the church can be proud of, their political clout, their influence in the community, perhaps the prominence of their pastor, perhaps a speaker nationally or internationally writes books or whatever. And we can, of course, come up with all kinds of lists. Now, if we were to judge the success of a church on those superficial standards, then the church at Thessalonica had little to commend itself for. First of all, it had no church building. Now, this isn't surprising because there were no church buildings until the third century. Churches met in homes or in caves or in banks of rivers or in woods, but predominantly they met in homes. They didn't have any church buildings. That didn't occur until Constantine became king, a ruler of the Roman Empire, and Constantine in the third century declared that Christianity was now a state religion. And he moved them into government buildings that were laying vacant, and he put government bureaucrats over the churches. And some people, you know, would think, well, golly, this is great. Christianity is now required. No, you have to be born again.

Doesn't have anything to do with where you're born, what country you're born in, or you must be born from above. That's the Greek word anophon. It's a heavenly birth that comes down. When I was in Nigeria on one of my trips, I had this driver, and I said, are you a Christian or a Muslim? He said, I'm a Christian. I said, oh, great. I said, when did you become a Christian? He said, well, I've always been a Christian. I'm the Yerba tribe. And he had no concept of a spiritual birth. It was a fact he was born into a Christian tribe. And he was confident that that made him a Christian. Most of the church members at Thessalonica were lower class. They were, many of them, current or former slaves.

And they were despised outcasts by Roman society. They didn't have a famous pastor. In fact, the names of the elders of that church didn't survive historically. We don't know who they were. We have no clue. But in spite of all this, Paul is going to write to them a very loving, touching letter. And he's got a lot to say about them as he admires them. He starts out by saying, Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians and God, our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace from God, the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[10:36] We are always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting because your faith is greatly enlarged and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater. Therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.

This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which indeed you are suffering. Paul mentions here his co-laborers. He starts with Silvanus. Now, the more common name to us is Silas. This is Silas. And he also mentions Timothy.

Silas is a neat guy. He was a partner to Paul. Like Paul, he was a converted Jew. Like Paul, he also had Roman citizenship, which was very important. We know how that worked for Paul and for Silas. He was a leading brother in Christ and Paul used him extensively. He was Paul's missionary partner, the senior member of the team. After Paul separated from Barnabas, they had a disagreement concerning John Mark. Now, they were later going to reconcile, but you can read about that in Acts. Silas was there and bore witness to the dramatic conversion of the Philippian jailer. He served as a scribe to Paul, writing down many of his letters. And he was also a very

trusted colleague. In fact, he was given the original letter of 1 Peter that Peter wrote to deliver to the readers of that book. Timothy, as you most likely know, was Paul's protege. It was his son in the faith. Both Timothy's mother and grandmother were instrumental in building his faith. Paul met Timothy during the second missionary journey, made him an immediate member of the team, loved him like a son. And the church at Thessalonica was actually founded on their second missionary journey. Well, there are about five things that Paul was interested in conveying to the Thessalonians and by extension to Highland Park Baptist Church.

He's going to give five things, real simple. First of all, he comments on genuine conversion, genuine conversion. In God, our father and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace from God, the father and the Lord Jesus Christ. By using the word in there, it starts in God, in to describe the Thessalonian position with God. Paul is describing their eternal life in God, the father and in Christ, the son. He says, this church is in the father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. By his greeting, Paul is telling the world that this is a regenerate church. It's a saved church. And Paul frequently describes believers as those being in Christ. And here and once in his first letter to the church, he describes believers being in God, the father. That's very rare in his writings. Only twice does he do that. But it serves as a reminder of the father's care for his churches that suffer persecution.

[14 : 27] You know, I'm still on the board at VOM and I've said this many times, people need to understand when they persecute the church who they're persecuting. Jesus taught Paul that lesson when he was Saul.

Saul, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Who are you, Lord? I'm Jesus. You're persecuting me. Jesus was in heaven. How could he be persecuting Jesus? Because when you persecute the church, who are you persecuting? Jesus. Jesus, the Lord Jesus Christ. It's his church.

But this was a regenerate church and it implies there are some that are not regenerate. And that's just a sad fact. There are some that aren't. Being in the father and in the son sets the Christian faith apart from world religions. I've traveled extensively in the Middle East, been in Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Oman, I can name 20 Muslim countries during Ramadan, their holy month even. A devout Muslim never speaks as God being father. That is verboten. That's one of the only German words I know. You can't do that. A person in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, that would be talking about God as their father would be in danger of punishment or perhaps even death.

A very serious matter. But true believers, true followers of Christ are partakers of the divine nature. I would encourage you to read 2 Peter 1.4 sometime and it talks about the fact that we're partakers of the divine nature. We share in eternal life with the father through union with the son of God. Out of our union with Christ flows both grace and peace. Grace is God's undeserved favor.

I read that, I typed that rather last night and I almost couldn't go on. I just kept staring at those words, undeserved favor. And when you have the undeserved, unearned, unmerited favor of God, that results in peace. You can be at peace with God. Paul does something else that is unique to Christianity. He places the father and the son alongside each other. He does this and in so doing, he affirms that Jesus is co-equal and co-eternal with the father. So Paul is revealing these truths to a saved church. In Paul's day and especially in ours, there are some unsaved churches and we all know that.

[17 : 20] But he wants the Thessalonians and he wants all of his churches, his true churches, their membership to be genuinely converted. The other thing is Paul's desire for this church is increasing faith. They have faith. They have saving faith.

He wants that faith to increase. We ought to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting because your faith is greatly enlarged. The word ought that appears here refers to a deep obligation that we owe God in Trinity, the triune God. It is a debt or responsibility that can never be fully repaid. We ought to give thanks. We can't give God too much thanks. And it's a debt that can't be fully repaid. God is to receive all of our gratitude for he alone is worthy of such worship.

Paul was grateful to God for having saved the Thessalonians and the fact that he was growing them spiritually. And he offers thanks to God the Father, God the Son for doing that for this church.

Paul was joyful because first he knew their faith was genuine, that was settled, and he knew that it was growing. The Thessalonians had a growing faith and this growth was being done in the face of severe persecution. Severe persecution. And you know, there's something very interesting about persecution.

And I wish this was original with me, but I'm going to claim it. I do that a lot anyway. But I'd never thought of it in these terms, and nor have I ever heard this expressed in all my years with the voice

of the martyrs. Persecution destroys false faith. It destroys it. No one that is not a true believer wants to hang around and be persecuted for a faith that is not genuine. You know, why would anybody want to do that? You know, I know I'm not real, but I'm going to hang around and be persecuted.

[19 : 56] It just doesn't happen. Persecution destroys false faith. This is why when you study the church at Smyrna, it was under severe persecution. And the best expression I ever heard on an example was, Smyrna was like a piece of gold. But you know, to get purity of gold, you have to heat it up, melt it, and the dross forms, and you get rid of it. And then you heat it up again, and the same thing happens, and finally you get down to where it's almost pure. Well, the fires of persecution had made Smyrna this kernel of gold. The unbelievers had fled long ago, and all that was left were true followers of Christ at the church at Smyrna. That's all that was there. And they received no condemnation.

Why not? Because their condemnation had been nailed to a cross. Romans 8.1, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. No condemnation. Smyrna is really an amazing church.

So is Thessalonica. Persecution strengthens a believer's faith. How? Driving them to God.

When you're being persecuted, who do you turn to? You turn to God. I am appalled, and I've heard this with my own ears, so I'm not speaking out of class here. I'm appalled at people in some American churches that refer to persecuted believers as not having enough faith. You know, God wouldn't be allowing this if they had more faith. The unsaved treat persecution as outside the will of God, and therefore a result of sin that a particular church may be going through at a particular moment in time.

nothing could be further from the truth. Nothing. Trouble, distress, affliction, pain, and suffering drive those with genuine faith to a greater dependence on the Lord. I love what the psalmist said in Psalm 119.

[22 : 15] Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word. Until he was afflicted, he went astray, and affliction came, and he had to race back to God. There was no one else to go to, and he says, now I'm under persecution. I'm going to keep your word. One great pastor that I dearly admire made a statement one time. He said, I've never prayed that persecution would come to America as it is in, you know, the Arab world or in Asia or places like that, but he said, I've come close.

I've come close because it would clean up the church roles, for one thing, and he's in a 10,000 person church, but he said, it drives away the unsaved. It destroys false faith. The Thessalonians, increasing faith in the face of persecution, affirmed that their genuine conversion was real, and they were truly walking with the Lord. I mean, Jesus told us, didn't he? You know, the world's going to hate you.

Why is the world going to hate us? Because it hates me, not me, Tom Holland, me, Jesus. The world hated Jesus, and therefore, it's going to hate the followers of Jesus.

Paul wrote in 2 Timothy, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, and I've said this so many times, people get tired of hearing it, but I told a friend of mine once, I said, you know, I've just never been persecuted. He said, be more godly, it'll come, and we laughed when he said that to me, but it's true. It's actually true. Be more godly, it will come. Persecution will come, and then Paul has something to say to this church and to Highland Park about their growing love, growing love, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater. Boy, this was making Paul happy. He's thrilled. He's thrilled with this, and I'll let you in on a little secret. Paul knew something. He didn't have much more time.

He didn't have much more time left. He knew that. He sensed that in his spirit, so this is kind of his last testimony to this church. Paul commends this church for their love.

[24 : 54] They loved the Lord, but they also loved each other, and it was Paul's desire that their love would increase, and it's easy to say here at Highland that we love each other, but what if circumstances changed? I mean, what if one of our members was on a mission trip and was taken to prison, or worse, lost his life? Would we stand up and be the sole support for a widow and children?

You know, would we put that love where the rubber meets the road? I would think we would. I would pray that we would, but, you know, we've never really experienced a type of persecution that they experience in a lot of parts of the world. These things were happening in Thessalonica.

People were being cast out of their little meager homes. They were being persecuted. They were being imprisoned. Some were being martyred. The love they expressed there was not fuzzy sentimentality.

That's the world's love. It is not based upon changing emotionalism. That's the world's love.

This was sacrificial love. That's the kind of love that puts Jesus on the cross, the depth of that love.

[26:23] It's the deepest love, and it's the kind of love and the only kind of love the Lord approves of. Now, the Lord Jesus himself called us to this level of love.

He's already issued that call to Highland Park Baptist Church and to all true churches. John chapter 13, verse 34 and 35, A new commandment I give you.

Whoa, let's get on the edge of our chairs here because he's given us a new commandment. That you love one another. Oh, well, now, Lord, you know, we like each other.

No, no, I didn't say that. He said love one another with agape, sacrificial love. Even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

And then the Lord, he puts a condition on that. And if you've never really looked at that, you really need to look at that. And I would encourage you, there's a little, Francis Schaeffer, the late Dr.

Schaeffer wrote 24 books.

[27:36] The briefest one was 60 pages. And it's called The Mark of the Christian. And it's about having love one for another. Get a hold of that book and read it.

Mike, you can read that in one night. No, no, no. Six minutes for you. Six months for me. The Lord says we're to love one another.

Here's the condition. By this, all men, how many? All. Saved, unsaved, kings, rulers, persecutors. By this, all men will know that you are my disciples. If you have love one for another.

Well, that is, that's powerful. Because you know what? The reverse is true. If you don't have, if we don't have love one for another, then the world looks at us and says, whoa, are you sure that you belong to Jesus?

[28:47] And are you even sure that he's legitimate? I mean, he said his followers are going to love him and you're not loving one another. So are you sure this is real? That's powerful.

I mean, how tragic it would be if the world looked at us and, you know, saw us fussing and feuding over the color of carpet. We did that 30 years ago and got it over with.

But there are churches that fuss and fight over all kinds of things. Increasing faith in God and love for others are essential elements of the redeemed.

They're essential. It is in our nature and it is to be evident within the church. We're talking about evidence as we live out our lives on this earth, even though our citizenship is in the heavenlies.

We're still here. And until the Lord comes back, we're to do these things. There's a fourth thing that Paul wanted for this church. And that was persevering hope.

[29:55] Persevering hope. Therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you. We there, by the way, is Paul, Silas, and Timothy. We ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.

Folks, this was a nothing church by human standards. Listen to what Paul is saying. We speak proudly of you, Thessalonica.

Along with their faith and love, it was Paul's desire that the hope of the Thessalonian believers would also increase. He wanted there to be increasing hope.

He had written about that in his first letter. He called it their steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. They were being steadfast in the hope, their hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And any time you see the Bible word hope, you have to remember something. This is not the kind of hope that the world has. I mean, I hope I win the lottery.

[31:12] Now, I don't play the lottery, and it's going to make it difficult. I hope I lose weight before I die. I'd like to lose it now instead of in heaven. But, you know, those are not settled matters.

I'm not steadfast in dieting. When you read the word hope in the New Testament, it is a settled matter.

It is settled in the heavenlies. That's why we can fix our hope on the Lord Jesus Christ. We can fix our hope on the death, burial, and resurrection.

We can fix our hope on the fact he is, at this moment, interceding for us at the right hand of the Father. We can fix our hope on the fact he's coming back for the church because he said he would.

Those are settled matters. It's not hope like the world hopes. And Paul is bragging on the Thessalonians. He said he speaks proudly about them to other churches.

[32 : 15] I find that so neat. He speaks proudly about them to other churches. Now, what were he and Silas and Timothy proud of?

It was this little church. No building, no money. And they were under severe persecution.

And it was their... He's proud of them because of their perseverance and faith in the midst of persecutions and afflictions.

They were an enduring church. Christ was first. Didn't matter what people thought about them, what people did to them.

They put their hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. Their love did not grow cold, as happened in Ephesus. And they did not abandon their hope in Christ.

[33 : 13] They were strong church. And we can learn much from them. We can learn much from them. And then finally, the fifth thing that Paul wanted in these people, and by extension all true churches, was a kingdom attitude.

A kingdom attitude. This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which indeed you are suffering.

See, they were ultimately suffering for the kingdom. They were suffering for their faith, for the cause of Christ, for the kingdom of the Lord. Many churches today are man-centered.

Many churches today are man-centered. This young church was God-centered. May we always be a God-centered church.

May we always be that. These church members were not consumed with personal happiness, fulfillment, comfort, success, or prosperity.

[34 : 29] Instead, they lived their lives every day in light of the command of Matthew 6.33. They were seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness.

And they knew when that happened, everything they needed in this life on this earth was going to be theirs. Like Abraham said back in the Old Testament, he was looking for a better place, a heavenly place, a heavenly city.

Believers can face trials with joy because we know that God is fitting us for kingdom living.

I mean, our eternal life started at the moment of conversion. We're members of the kingdom. We just happen to be down here as ambassadors for Christ. God is fitting us for kingdom living.

God never evaluates a church based upon externals. God is not concerned with how politically astute the church may be.

[35 : 39] He's not concerned about how much money we raise. Folks, the cattle on a thousand hills are His. Every now and then we should sell some and give us some money, but we won't get into that tonight.

But He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. He's not concerned about how big our physical plant is. I remember a church in Houston that had a \$34 million addition to the church.

And a week after they cut the ribbon, Bailey Smith was down there doing a revival and he said, why are you building these things? The Antichrist is going to get these someday. You know, why are you building these for him?

\$34 million. \$34 million. God is not concerned with the physical plant. Thessalonica was meeting in a home.

They were in a home. God looks at the heart. He wants to see the genuinely converted.

[36 : 44] He wants to see the genuinely converted's faith increasing. He wants to see our love for Him and fellow believers increasing as an example to the lost world.

Might it be that they could see our love for one another and be drawn to the cross? He wants to see our hope as something that can endure all trials.

There's no trial that is greater than our hope. And He wants us to be kingdom focused. That's where our citizenship already resides.

That's where we're going to spend eternity. And the Lord would have us to focus on that now. Not to wait for some future event. But be kingdom living now.

Thank you.