

Rejoice in Each Other's Faith

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Preacher: Tim Foster

- [0 : 0 0] Thank you so much Fiona for leading us in worship this evening. Welcome to you all. It's great to be here and great to be continuing our series in 1 Thessalonians.
- If you don't have a Bible, grab one from an end of a pew. It would be useful to have it in front of you as we go through this evening. I wonder as we start if we could consider how painful it is to be separated from a loved one.
- I'm sure many of us know it well in different forms. Some of us perhaps are used with our other half going away on business. And you kind of, you get used to it, you acclimatise to it over time, don't you?
- If regularly one of you is away and you kind of just fall into the pattern. But isn't it tough? Even if you're used to it, going to your bed and there's no one there.
- Or when things go wrong and you break the flask on the coffee machine and there's coffee dripping over the countertop.
- [1 : 1 2] And you just want to give up. You want someone to talk to. You want someone to come in and say it's okay and mop up the dirty remains and kind of make the place livable again.
- Or perhaps some of us know the separation from a loved one and having children going away to university or to live elsewhere. And we care for them deeply.
- And we've watched them come up from nothing to the young men and young women that they are now. And we would long for everything just to be as it was 10 years ago.
- Maybe 20 when they were nice little things that you could deal with. And yet they can't forever remain children. And we care desperately for them even though they've grown up and even though they need to make their own choices.
- Perhaps for some of us it's just the reality of living in a city church. And we see folk that we've known for years grow and move on. They came as students maybe with us.
- [2 : 1 7] And our hearts were bonded in that time in church and then off they go. And the situations of life frequently seem to wrench those whom we love away from us to other cities or to other churches or just away from us.
- And often in these cases we know that hard times are going to come for them. We know that the other half or the child going away for university or the friend that's just leaving for another place.
- We know that hard times are going to come. Whether that's financial hardship or whether that's isolation. Whether that's stress or worry. Health problems or trouble at work.
- Frustrations with friends or whatever it might be. We can see the afflictions coming down the road to them. And yet we cannot intervene. It's just not possible.
- And we desperately long that they would be okay. We pray desperately to God that he would care for them when we cannot. And with our minds in that mindset.
- [3 : 3 4] I think that's the right mindset that we come to this passage this evening. Remember Paul established this church in Thessalonica. And left amid the riot.

Within a very few number of weeks. Maybe as little as two or three weeks. And we saw last week how Paul considered himself like a mother. Like a father to these people.

Like a faithful steward in the household. And though they had only had those few days together. I hope we'll see the depth of love. The depth of care.

And the compassion that Paul had for these new disciples. And that we'll see that they have the same love for him. And for his team. And as we consider the love that they have for one another.

Way back when. I hope that we'll be challenged about our love and care for each other. And for the church at large this evening. So let me pray. And then we'll get stuck into the meat of our passage this evening.

[4 : 36] Father. We're aware that this evening. You have given us a wonderful day. And now as we turn aside to look at your word. To learn what it is that you would say to us.

In this passage of scripture that we have for us this evening. We pray. Would you bring alive this inspired word to us? Would you challenge our hearts?

Would you encourage us? Would you deepen our love for you. And our love for the other Christians in our lives. And we pray Lord. Would you deal with us ever so gently this evening.

And would we know that you're at work in our lives. We pray in Jesus name. Amen. So firstly. Having read our passage together. Didn't you hear Paul's depths of love.

For the young Christians here at Thessalonica. Particularly in chapter 2. 17 to the end of chapter 2. Last week we heard that language of being like a mother.

[5 : 39] Of being like a father. And that depth of feeling certainly continues into our passage this week. Paul feels as if the separation of the apostles team.

From this little fledgling church. It was like an orphaning. Yet notice the pains that Paul takes to show. That they're not forgotten.

They're not uncared for. Paul's desire has always been for them. He desperately wants to see them again. A great desire.

With even more eagerness. He wants to be with them. On various occasions. He wanted to double back. To get to them.

And the desire to hear about them. Has been so great. That Paul is willing to be left alone. In Athens. In a pagan city. This little church planting team.

[6 : 37] We saw in week one. When Graham took us through the context. They've been pushed and pulled. They've been stretched to their very limits. And yet Paul is not content.

To abandon these people. That he struggled to gain for Christ. Being prominent. And having already faced. The malice of these Thessalonian Jews twice.

First in Thessalonica. And then Berea. It seems impossible for Paul to go back. But did you notice. That it didn't just seem to be. That he couldn't go back.

For fear of people. He has this explanation. That Satan has hindered. His return to them. I'm not sure if Paul is.

Just giving a supernatural explanation. For the actions of the. Of Thessalonica's Jewish community. Who've rejected Jesus. And been afflicting these Christians.

[7 : 32] Or if something else. Is keeping him from revisiting this area. Perhaps the basis. For this being. Satan's work. Is that many elements.

Have compounded together. To keep him from going back. Perhaps there's been something. Explicitly supernatural going on. Which Paul wasn't able to. Overcome.

I'm not sure. But it's certainly not. That Paul is saying. That it was out of God's control. Don't take the wrong. Spin off this.

We'll see shortly. At the end of our passage. About Paul's prayer. And how he's trusting God. And certainly. God would be using. Even these circumstances.

To grow. And to test. The Thessalonian Christians. To ensure. That their confidence. Was in God. Isn't that often.

[8 : 25] The lesson. That we are to learn. In times of disappointment. And in spoiled plans. To rely. Afresh. On God's plans.

And not to be confident. In what we can cobble together. Ourselves. I'm preaching to myself here. And it's not. That we apathetically.

Accept whatever happens. To us. But that we strive. To know his will. To seek his glory. And to trust. That what he is doing.

Is better. Even when we can't see the purpose. And when we can't see the method. Whatever it was. That kept Paul. From seeing them in person.

It certainly didn't. Dull his love for them. And I was struck. As I was digging into this passage. That Paul's language seems. It seems overboard.

[9 : 22] It almost sounds heretical. I don't think Paul was. But it almost sounds. Notice verses 19 and 20. The Thessalonian church. Was the team's hope.

Their joy. Their crown of boasting. Even their glory and joy. I'd be very careful. About using that words. About anyone human. Wouldn't you? After Paul's work in Turkey.

Which ended with a real uncertainty. About where they were going next. After the short time in Philippi. Which ended abruptly. With only the small group of disciples.

Following the work in Athens. That happened after this. Which seems to have been slow. Hard work. With few converts. In the middle of all this.

Was Paul's work in Thessalonica. Probably the most promising church. That Paul had planted in Europe. And down in chapter 3 verse 8.

[10 : 19] Paul goes on to say. He goes as far to say. As now we really live. Since you are standing firm in the Lord. Isn't that overboard Paul?

It seems that they're so closely bound together. That the standing of the church in Thessalonica. It almost made the rise and fall of Paul.

And of the missionary team that he was with. It would have had a massive impact on them. If this church had fallen. And they were so concerned.

That almost life has lost its savor. Until they found out that the church was okay. And I start to think about my own attitudes to church.

As I come on Sunday. As I meet with people during the week. And of fellow Christians generally. And can I say that they're my joy.

[11 : 24] And hope and crown. I hope you don't take this the wrong way. But I don't think I've ever said. That the guys at Brunsfield. Are my crown of glory. Well then I'm a pastor.

Or a church planter anyway. But do you see the passion that Paul is expressing here for other Christians? This group was particularly close to Paul's heart.

But and maybe we shouldn't expect that we'll be as passionate about all churches this way. But how is our care and compassion for each other at Brunsfield?

Is our attitude that of some sort of casual observer? Are we more like satisfied customers? Could our attitude be best summed up as cool apathy?

Or if we found in ourselves to write a letter to Brunsfield. Would we find ourselves full of passion? Enthusing and overflowing.

[12 : 27] Longing for the good of the community. Deeply concerned over the struggles and challenges. Rejoicing in how they're flourishing. I find myself struck by my own coolness.

And how do we begin to bring our change of our own attitudes? How do we begin to communally change the attitudes of our meetings together? How are we going to pray for God to enliven our hearts and knit them together?

In true fellowship. In partnership. Worship. It's no simple thing. But surely as we seek each other's best interests.

As we invite the Spirit of God to stir us. As we focus our minds on Jesus and worship our great God together. Surely God will be at work binding us together, won't He?

As we pray for one another. And meet up with one another. As we get to know one another. And as we worship with one another. As we learn with one another.

[13 : 35] As we share in communion with one another. As we run clubs and courses and events together. As we move houses for one another. And as we cook for one another. And as we serve with one another.

As we forgive one another. As we forgive one another. If our hearts are open. And we honestly seek God to meld our hearts together.

Won't we find ourselves growing in fellowship and in mutual love? And some of you guys are so good at that. And it's fantastic to see.

And I just long for the moment when it clicks for all of us in the same way. This church in Thessalonica. It was Paul's utter delight.

He desperately desired to hear about them. To know that they were doing well. He eagerly desired to see these Christians again.

[14 : 34] To encourage them in the faith. If you had to give point one a title. They were Paul's desire and delight. And as we move into verses one to six of chapter three.

We find Timothy's mission and report. Timothy's mission and report. In the light of Paul's longing to hear about these Thessalonians.

This young man Timothy is sent on a mission. It's perhaps important to remember that at this stage. Timothy isn't Paul's right hand man.

This isn't the man who's journeyed with Paul for 20 years. He's still fairly new to the team here. He's only just joined before they went to Greece.

And perhaps there was substantial risk in this scenario. Think about it with me. Timothy still young and inexperienced. Leaving Paul alone in Athens with no church.

[15 : 39] No haven. No support network. To go back to an area where they've been almost lynched twice. To hear from a group of new converts.

That quite possibly have abandoned their newfound faith. Is it any wonder why Paul's concerned? There's risk here.

There's risk here. But notice what Paul is thinking in all this. Timothy's role wasn't just to go and be a spy. He wasn't just to gather information. He was to strengthen and to encourage this young church.

And especially to ensure that they would be resilient to affliction and suffering. Clearly when Paul was there the first time.

He hadn't stood up with some sort of prosperity gospel. And left them to find out a hard way that the Christian life isn't easy. And notice verse 4 where Paul reminds them that they were forewarned by him.

[16 : 43] Paul saw the trouble coming. But he didn't shy away. And he taught them to expect trouble. But even with that teaching.

Even with that foreknowledge. Paul was still worried. He was still worried that they would be tempted to leave the faith. Paul was still concerned that Satan who was evidently at work against Paul.

In keeping him from returning to these people. That Satan would also be at work drawing the Thessalonian Christians away from the faith. Teasing them away with affliction.

With persecution. And whether again that's just the actions of the society around them. The actions of the Jews who would have persecuted them and ostracized them.

And the Gentiles who would probably have criminalized them. Or whether that's by another means we can't really tell. But we come to this idea that hardship is absolutely sure as Christians.

[17 : 53] And that's a hard reality for us. In modern Western Christianity we don't like to talk about afflictions.

And the fact that they're bound to come our way. We often fall into the pattern of thinking that faith in Christ will make us comfortable and happy. Even if it's not the explicit belief on our foreheads.

It's the thing that permeates our mind. And we forget that if we fully follow Jesus. We're going to be at odds with this world.

We'll face the subtle discomfort of the staff room. The awkward silences when we walk into the office. The tough questions when we're out on site.

Of course we will. Because we don't belong here. Our citizenship isn't of Scotland or of the UK or of Europe or even of this world.

[18 : 51] We're citizens of another kingdom. Of God's kingdom. And we don't belong here. And while we're here. As Peter puts it.

Strangers in exiles awaiting the return of our Lord. We need to be ready for it. Not that we should go and stand out like sore thumbs.

Not that we should go around hoping for the little jibe. So we can claim persecution. Oh I'm such a good Christian. Oh yeah someone gossiped about me behind my back.

Oh I've been persecuted. I'm such a good Christian. No. But if we aren't prepared for the struggles of living among people who are fundamentally different to us.

Who will fundamentally misunderstand us. Then we're never going to be stable. We're never going to be level headed. And we'll never be able to reach out with open arms and point them to our saviour.

[19 : 51] Paul was deeply worried about these Christians. But do you see the relief of verse 6? The tension and the anxiety of not knowing.

It fades into the bliss of hearing good news. This is the only place in the Bible where the Greek word for good news is used for anything other than the gospel.

That's how good a news this was. This was the best news that Paul could have heard. Timothy returned with a good report.

These guys faith. It's in good stead. Their love is still growing and abounding. They still remember you Paul. They remember us fondly when we were there.

And they still hope that you'll be able to come back to them again in the future. It seems as if their hearts have been tuned to the same music. Though they are still apart.

[20 : 52] They move to the same beat of faith. They resonate with the same love. And God has been exceptionally gracious to this little church.

Keeping them and growing them even as their apostles being forced away from them. And so we see that Paul's delight and desire for the Thessalonians.

It's been vindicated in Timothy's mission and in his report. And now we come to the third and the final section of our passage. Paul's encouragement and prayer.

The report that Timothy brought. It wasn't just good news. It wasn't one of those texts that I received from my mother.

Whenever they get home safely after having just seen us. Home safe. Good night. They drive hundreds of miles without me ever seeing them.

[21 : 46] And I never get the text. But when they've left me. They seem to have this need to send the text. Home safe. Good night. These reports of the Thessalonians.

Their attitudes and faith. They were in turn an encouragement to the apostle and his team. It wasn't just positive news.

It was encouraging. It's not that the Thessalonians have been undergoing hardship. While Paul enjoys a little cruise through the Greek islands. He and his companions have themselves been in distress and affliction.

And now they're being comforted through the faith of this church in Thessalonica. Paul and his fellow workers. They're not robots. So often we think of Paul as this machine who just kept on going and ignored everything around him.

But it's not true. He couldn't go on without a bit of encouragement. And nor are the staff and the elders here. It's not that they can keep pouring themselves out for the gospel without some sign of God's grace in their lives.

[23 : 01] And in the lives of their hearers. And here are the Thessalonians. And they're so able to spur Paul on to keep going.

Their word has been profitable. When Paul preached it wasn't a waste of time. Even in Thessalonica. Even with the riots. Even with the malice of the people.

So despite the hardships of where Paul is now. Probably Corinth where he's writing this letter from. He can keep on going. Knowing that God is able to keep.

Knowing that God is able to work in every situation. Knowing that the call to go into Europe wasn't a mistake or a misunderstanding. But that God was faithfully working.

And nothing would stop him from fulfilling his divine will. Paul's encouragement moves him to then pray in continual thanksgiving.

[24 : 02] Do you notice his words? It's almost as if he's failing for words. As he thinks of the overwhelming joy that he has for them.

We see Paul here as a deeply emotional man. He's continually praising God. Longing that God would open up a way for them to see each other again.

And for Paul to be able to teach them and train them more fully in the faith. This is a wonderful snapshot of how deeply Paul felt for these Christians.

And both how thankful he was to God. As well as how dependent he was to God for his work in their situation. And so now Paul transitions into the next formal prayer in his letter.

And this is going to move our letter into the next section. We ought to notice that there are three main prayer requests in this little prayer at the end of chapter 3. And the first is that they would see each other.

[25 : 06] We just can't get away from the fact that Paul wants to see this church again. It's his overwhelming desire. He keeps coming back to it. But he knows that only God can make it happen.

And would we become known as a people who love each other, who love you and who are flat out passionate for all that you have for us?

And Lord, we're so aware that love in this world sense can be so misinterpreted.

And so we pray, Lord, that you would be growing us and strengthening us in holiness. That you would be showing us how to live. That you would be teaching us to say no to sin and yes to you.

[30 : 52] And that we would be strongly following after you. Striving, as Paul strived, to finish the race well. To complete what you set before him.

Father, these are high things.

And no amount of effort on our own basis can achieve them. And yet we are utterly sure of your grace. And we know your power.

We just saw this morning your eternity. And we pray, Lord, this evening that you would come. And that you would align our hearts with yours.

And that we would follow hard after you. Not just today, not just this week, but for the rest of our lives. Knowing your power at work in our lives.

[31 : 55] Lord God, help us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.