

Rejoicing in a Fledgling Faith

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[0 : 00] I imagine you have questions. Questions about Jesus?

Questions about Christianity? Questions about church? Questions about the Bible? If that's you, know that the Thessalonians were no different.

When we go later on into the book, we get an idea of some of the questions they were asking. How should Christians' lives look different from the world?

What does it look like to love one another? What happens when we die? When should we expect Jesus to return?

Who should we listen to? Who shouldn't we listen to? These are the kind of questions the church, but before Paul's letter arrives, they do not know the answer to.

[1 : 10] They don't know what happens to them when they die. And we could, I'm sure, add plenty of our own questions too, couldn't we?

How do I pray? How can I trust the Bible? How do I read the Bible? Why is church so important? How do I share the gospel with people?

How do I know if I'm really a Christian? You'll have plenty of your own, but you could add to that list as well. The problem so often is that when we have those questions, we can start to feel a bit insecure about our faith.

As if it's on shaky ground. And we might start to think that's maybe a measure of how good a Christian we really are.

Here's how my own thought process worked in the early days of my walk with Christ. I think to myself, if I was really a Christian, surely I'd know a bit more about the Bible.

[2 : 21] Surely I'd know how to pray better than I do. Surely I'd know the answer to these nagging questions. Or be able to explain the gospel to someone more clearly. But then I wouldn't want to ask my minister or someone I trusted.

Because I thought, if I admit that I don't really know what I'm doing, they'll think I'm a terrible Christian. And so I'd just muddle along.

And hope the answers would magically appear or the problems would disappear. Let me just assure you that if you are sitting here this evening, thinking some of those things, you are not alone.

Not only are you not alone, you are where every other Christian either is or has been before. What we're going to see this evening in 1 Thessalonians is what Paul says to Christians.

Who haven't quite got it all figured out yet. We've been going through this book of 1 Thessalonians as a church for a number of weeks now. And if you've been with us over the past two Sunday evenings, you'll probably know by now that the audience Paul is writing to is a very young church.

[3 : 46] These are people who, by the time Paul's letter arrives, have only been Christians for perhaps a matter of months.

They are young in their faith. And so it is hardly surprising to read, as we did in verse 10 of chapter 3, that their faith is not yet complete.

It is not perfect. Just look there with me. It's verse 10 of chapter 3. Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Paul is desperate to visit the Thessalonians so that he can help them grow as Christians. But as we just read, he doesn't simply say, does he, I'm really keen to come and visit you guys.

But the whole section we just read, it begins and ends with Paul stressing his desire to want to see the Thessalonians. But he says a whole lot more, doesn't he? And what we're just going to unpack a little bit this evening is why he says a whole lot more.

[5 : 06] And let me tell you, I think it is really encouraging and helpful stuff. I certainly thought so. I applied it to my own life and circumstances this last week.

Because we all know, don't we? We all know that our faith is not perfect. Our faith is lacking something, isn't it?

And sometimes that can really worry us. Am I really a Christian? Is it all true? Do I really believe it? All of our faith is lacking something.

But before Paul concerns himself with what is lacking in the Thessalonians' faith, he turns his attention onto the faith that the Thessalonians do have.

That's what he wants to focus on first and foremost. He says to these young Christians through these verses, I am not ashamed of your faith that is lacking.

[6 : 19] I am not ashamed of your faith that is lacking. I rejoice in the faith that you have. I am not ashamed in your faith that is lacking.

I rejoice in the faith that you do have. So as we go through this passage together, I want us to just put ourselves in the position of one of the members of this young church in Thessalonica.

With a mind full of questions. And a faith that you know is imperfect. Maybe you don't have to stretch your mind very far to imagine that. But as we do that, here are these three encouragements. And I think the Apostle Paul wants us to soak in. First of all, Paul is confident in our future.

I wonder what you think Paul would consider the greatest achievement in his life. I ask myself the same question.

[7 : 30] Radio this week and realize I've done very little with my 28 years. But Paul, Paul had done a lot, hadn't he? Here's a man with an impressive resume.

Actually, let me put that question a little differently. What do you think Paul was most looking forward to telling Jesus about when he comes again?

He's one of the greatest Christian missionaries, isn't he? He's a man who risked his life numerous times for the gospel. He planted an incredible number of churches.

He told innumerable people all about Jesus. He stood up to authorities to defend the gospel and Christ's church. He was the pest of theologians.

He was a great writer. I mean, he is one of, if not the most read author in human history, isn't he? What do you think he was most looking forward to telling Jesus about when he returned?

[8 : 46] Just look there with me at verse 19 of chapter 2. After outlining his desire to come and see them again, Paul says, For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes?

What is it? Is it not you? You are our glory and joy.

There are two things that I think are really striking. But what Paul says here, first, what Paul looks forward to on the day that Jesus returns is not boasting about any of his achievements.

It's pointing out the faith of the Thessalonians. Look at how they responded to your gospel. Look at what they were willing to give up to live for Jesus.

He will glory not in what he has done, but in how they have responded to the gospel. I think the second thing that is so striking is how sure Paul is that the Thessalonian church will be there on that day.

[10 : 13] What is the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus? You are. You whose faith is lacking.

You who have many questions. You who don't understand much of what it means to be a Christian, but have put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Paul knows that you are going to be there with him on that glorious day. There is no doubt in his mind.

We might doubt our own faith at points, but the wonderful news that Paul knows full well is that when people have a genuine faith that stands up to the trials of this world, he knows that faith.

That faith is a gift from God. And if God has given it to you, however shaky you might feel from day to day, he is never going to take that away.

[11 : 22] He will never let you go. You are his and he is going to hold you fast until the very end. And so Paul encourages the Thessalonian church whose faith is lacking by saying, I am confident in your future.

I know where you are going to be when the Lord Jesus returns. And it is with me as I proclaim how great your faith is.

Paul is confident in our future. The second thing the Thessalonian church will be hearing is that Paul is aware of our foe.

Paul himself is not able to return to the Thessalonian church, but so desperate is the small band of missionaries to get word from them that they send Timothy off on his own.

And they leave themselves shorthanded. We thought it would be best to be left by ourselves. We were willing to put ourselves in more jeopardy in order to find out how you were getting on.

[12 : 37] And a big part of the apostle's desperation to get someone to Thessalonica is because he knows they are in a war.

They are in a war and they are facing a very real enemy. We've heard much through this letter, haven't we, that the Thessalonian church was not only expecting but was on the receiving end of persecution.

Paul warned them of it. He said, listen, the Christian life is not an easy life. People aren't going to love you for proclaiming the name of Jesus. You will suffer for it.

But in these verses, he puts something in there, doesn't he? It shows us it's not just the world that's fighting against you. Just look down there, verse 5 with me.

For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.

[13 : 45] There is an enemy of God's people who is desperate to see every one of us give up on Jesus.

That's partly why Paul was so keen to send Timothy. But again, let's think, not just why Paul was worried about the tempter tempting them, think about why he's telling the church in Thessalonica this as part of his letter.

Why does he want them to know that he was genuinely concerned about the attacks the devil will inevitably try and land on these new believers?

And I think when we think about it like that, we start to see that rather than a reason to panic, Paul telling the church this is, I think, in a very real way, an assurance to them.

But the opposition they are facing is not because of their own failings. It is because there is a real enemy trying to lead them astray.

[15 : 08] The devil is a real enemy to us as God's people, whether we're aware of him or not. And you're much better knowing about him than living as if he didn't exist.

That's true of every war, isn't it? And the Christians' battle is no different. You can imagine that the people of Ukraine live very differently now to they would have done two years ago, don't they?

Why? Because they know they're in a battle. They know they're in a war. They live ready to defend, expecting attacks to come, and ready to shield themselves from those attacks.

It would be mad, wouldn't it, if you went about your daily life in eastern Ukraine as if nothing was different? You hear the air raid sirens go off and you just think, what a racket.

You can carry on with your gardening. That'd be crazy, wouldn't it? The devil is real, and his attacks are real.

[16 : 29] And then there's, again, two really helpful things about how Paul communicates this to the young church. First, he gives us a pretty good idea, doesn't he, of what the devil attacks will look like.

Verse 5 again, I was afraid the tempter had tempted you. We don't need to worry about bombs falling from the air, but we do need to worry very much about being tempted. Now, that can come in many forms, and it's a bit like what Joe was saying about the Sermon on the Mount this morning. There are plenty of places in the Bible that deal with the specifics in more detail. But here, Paul just wants to flag up the reality and remind the church and remind us that we do need to be on our guard.

But by bringing our attention to the tempter, Paul is preparing us, isn't he? He's helping us so that we can know when we are tempted to sin, when we are tempted to give up on Jesus, when we are tempted to abandon him or break his good law, now we know that is not who we are in Christ.

That is not who you are in Christ. You do not need to give in. That is the work, the attack of someone who wants me to fail.

[17 : 56] And so instead of giving in, we say, don't we be gone, Satan. You have no power here. And he does have no power, because he has been defeated on the cross once and for all.

But before he draws his imminent last breath, he is thrashing with all his might to cause whatever destruction he can. So do not underestimate his power, but do not overestimate it either.

Paul shows us the form we can expect the devil's attacks to arrive in, but he also assures his Thessalonian brothers and sisters that their vulnerability to the devil's attacks is not a sign of any shortcoming in their own faith.

Just look back to verse 18 of chapter 2. It's such a simple thing, but I think such a helpful thing that Paul is very honest, isn't he?

That the enemy he is worried might be attacking the church is the exact same one who's been hindering Paul himself.

[19 : 09] Don't think you graduate beyond being tempted in the Christian life, or that because you are tempted at times, it must mean you're not believing enough or whatever else.

The devil will wage his war on every believer, the new converts and the apostle Paul. Stand firm against his attacks, but don't expect them to disappear.

But also don't think their existence is in any way a condemnation of your faith. So Paul is confident in our future.

He is aware of our foe. And then thirdly and finally, he delights in our faith. He delights in our faith. When Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica, there was one thing he wanted to find out about. I don't know if you noticed that as we read verse 5 earlier.

[20 : 14] Paul doesn't want to find out if they are safe, does he?

Paul wants to find out about their faith. That's not because he didn't care about their physical welfare, but because he knew what was of even greater importance.

There's a lesson even just in that for us, isn't there? Faith is what matters to Paul above all else. He would rather see people on the receiving end of violent persecution in Christ than living a comfortable life apart from Christ.

And his concern was then was focused first and foremost on their relationship to Jesus. That's what really mattered to Paul. I wonder if we can say the same thing for ourselves.

So Timothy is sent to find out about their faith. And he returns with good news. The Thessalonian church has stood firm in their young faith.

[21 : 40] And so he is overjoyed. Just look down there at verse 7 of chapter 3 with me. How does Paul respond to the good news of hearing about the Thessalonians' faith?

He says, Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution, we were encouraged about you because of your faith.

For now we really live since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?

Paul responds to real faith with real joy. What kind of faith was it? Verse 10.

It was a faith that was lacking something. It was a faith that had a lot of questions. It was a faith that didn't even know what happened when people died.

[22 : 49] But it was a genuine, God-given faith. Imperfect, but real. And Paul's response to that is not disappointment, but delight.

In the midst of his own persecution, what encourages him is the thought that the Thessalonian church is sticking in even though they're not 100% sure what they should be doing.

How can we thank God enough for the joy we have because of you? Paul is bursting with excitement at Christians who don't know all the answers but nevertheless keep on living for Jesus. That is how Paul feels about the fledgling faith of the Thessalonians. And so you can be assured, that is how Jesus feels about you and me.

Brothers and sisters, that is how we feel about so many of you. Something that struck me earlier this week, not only was Paul encouraged and excited by the faith of the Thessalonian church, Paul told the Thessalonian church how encouraged and excited he was by then.

[24 : 18] I know I can speak for myself. I've failed to let many of you know personally what an encouragement you are.

And I do hope to rectify that soon, but let me just say publicly how much of an encouragement this church family is to one another, to myself and to Joe and to the elders and to many other people and churches across this country.

In the middle of January, I was at a kind of training conference thing for free church ministers. And during the conference, there was a number of ministers. I can't remember exactly how many, but it was quite a few, some who I knew and some who I didn't, who came and said how encouraged they were by this church.

That's you. It's not happening because of me or Joe. That is happening because of what God is doing through you.

And we just get to share in that. You're a great encouragement to us as elders for all sorts of reasons. There are many of you going through trying times, trying circumstances that maybe not many people know about, but you keep coming to church to praise God.

[25 : 48] You keep on loving his people. You keep on giving your time and energy to support the work of the gospel at home, in work, at church, at university.

That is amazing. And we rejoice and are greatly encouraged by that. There are some of you who have been serving faithfully in this congregation for years and years, some of you longer than I've been alive, in ways that go unseen and unnoticed by many people.

That is wonderful faithfulness. And we are so encouraged and thankful for you. There are some of you who have publicly professed your faith in Christ in the last year or two and are excited about learning from his words and studying with others.

We praise God for that. And they want you to know that you are a massive encouragement, not just to us, but to everyone here.

Some of you have started coming along who have never been to church before and are giving your life to Jesus, serving in his church. That is wonderful.

[27 : 07] And we rejoice in what we see in you. Know, brothers and sisters, none of you are a burden. Know how encouraging it is when we hear about events weeks at uni.

How encouraging it is when we see you bring colleagues to the carol service. How much we rejoice when we hear that you're reading your Bible with your friends. We delight in your faith.

Not because it is perfect, but because we can see, even if you can't, that it is real.

Let me just close by saying a couple of things as we take in this passage as a whole. If you are here and have not yet given your life to Jesus, know that you don't need to know everything before putting your faith in him.

The church, like Paul, is not expecting perfect, ready-made Christians who know it all and can do it all. What we long for is disciples who are putting their faith in Jesus and eager to learn the way.

[28 : 29] But if you have put your faith and trust in Jesus, know how good a thing that is. Know that you are an encouragement to others in ways you probably don't even realize.

Be encouraged by others and let them know when they are an encouragement to you. Paul rejoices in a church that has a faith that is lacking.

He knows they are going to come under attack, but he knows he will stand next to them in glory because the faith we have is a God-given, life-giving faith.

It is a faith, isn't it, that acknowledges at its very roots we need help. We are not perfect, but in Christ and in one another, we have the help we need.

so let us build one another up that we too might look forward to the day that our Lord returns and we can glory in the faith of those around us.

[29 : 44] Let us pray as we close together. Father, we thank you for this book once more.

We thank you for how we see in it Paul's love for the Thessalonians. and as we marvel at his depth of his love, at the joy he has for them, we know there is only a shadow of the love you have for us and the joy in the heavenly hosts when one sinner repents and puts their faith and trust in Jesus.

We pray that we would be an encouragement to one another Lord, we pray that we would rejoice and delight in the faith that we see amongst our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Help us to resist the attacks of the evil one, knowing that you will hold us fast until that final day when we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus because of the faith that we see in others.

in the name of Jesus we pray. Amen. Amen. We're going to close by singing one final hymn together.

[31 : 15] O church, arise. I think. Yes.