

## What Encourages a Pastor Most

2 Samuel 18:19–33, 1 Thessalonians 3:6–10

In a fallen world we hear bad news every day: of war, crime and corruption in high places. We long for good news. The preacher called of righteousness has a message that the Bible calls the “gospel”—the good news of Christ’s salvation, of divine mercy, of forgiveness of sins, of the coming of his kingdom—a day when peace and righteousness and justice will triumph and prevail eternally.

Last week we learned that the apostle Paul, deeply concerned about the saints in Thessalonica, sent Timothy, his young associate and son in the faith, to make a face-to-face visit to see how things were going. Today we learn that Timothy has returned and brought a good report. The apostle Paul is greatly encouraged. Let’s look at this more in-depth. I have three points: (1) a good report, (2) faith and love, (3) intercessory prayer. First,

### 1. A good report

Paul writes, “Now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you—therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith.”

Timothy has returned from his visit to Thessalonica. He has traveled 600 miles, much of it on foot. His time was well spent; he worshipped with the church, preached to them, visited in their homes, heard their stories of how Christ has changed their life. Now he has returned. He has brought good news.

“Brought . . . good news” is a form of the Greek word εὐαγγελίζω, meaning *evangelize* or *tell the good news*. An evangelist is a person who tells the good news of Christ and his salvation. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Septuagint) the word εὐαγγελίζω is used 18 times. It translates words meaning *publish, bear tidings, bring good tidings*. In Psalm 40 David prefigures the coming of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, when he says, “I have *proclaimed the good news* of righteousness in the great assembly; indeed, I do not restrain my lips, O LORD, You Yourself know.” When the Messiah would come, he would proclaim the good news of righteousness in his church. This he did in person during his incarnation, and this he does vicariously through his chosen ministers as they go around the world preaching the gospel day after day, until he comes again. We—all of us—are sinners who fall short of God’s standard, which is absolute perfection. The only way that we can be saved is through the Lord Jesus, the preacher of righteousness, the bringer of good news. The Bible has a lot to say about good news. *The good news is the gospel!*

But in the present case, Timothy brings Paul a good report of how the gospel is transforming the saints of Thessalonica into men and women of faith. God wants his people to be strong in faith. By grace we are saved, through faith. God wants

his people's faith to grow and mature. He wants us to be strong in faith. It is said of Abraham that "he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was *strong in faith*, giving glory to God" (Rom. 4:20). God had promised Abraham that in his old age he would father a child—a son. Abraham, taking note of his aging body, knew that this was impossible, physically speaking. He and his wife Sarah had been married for many years but had never had a child of their own. Now, God promised him a son. He was overjoyed! He could hardly believe his ears. There was no way he could do this on his own. It was God who had given the promise, and it was God who would have to fulfill it. Abraham had no other option than to believe God. He took that option by faith.

Some people erroneously believe that they have to help God fulfill Bible prophecy. Years ago I heard of a group of people who were trying to develop a red heifer. They were convinced that the Second Coming could not take place unless there was a red heifer ready to be sacrificed in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. They were trying to raise money for genetic research in order to develop a red heifer that could be sent to the Holy Land, thus speeding Christ's second coming. My dear one, do not be taken in by this kind of chicanery! The God of heaven is perfectly capable of bringing about the second coming of Christ without your help or mine. "The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout." If he is able to do that, then it will be child's play for him to produce a red heifer—if that is needed. There have been two physical temples on Mount Zion in Jerusalem: that built by Solomon, which was destroyed by the Babylonians, and the second temple built by Zerubbabel. The third temple is spiritual. It is plainly identified by Paul when he speaks in 1 Corinthians and says, "Do you not know that *you* are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? . . . For the temple of God is holy, which temple *you* are." Clearly, the church of Jesus Christ is the temple, the dwelling place of God. There is no longer need of a physical temple—or of Levitical priest, or of animal sacrifices—now that Christ has come.

Timothy visited the church in Thessalonica to see how they were doing. Our presbytery has a Church Visitation Committee that visits churches in an official capacity, as an expression of the presbytery's pastoral care and oversight over the congregations. As presbyterians, we are part of a larger family of churches, and we can draw upon their gifts and resources.

Timothy was sent by the apostle Paul. Timothy visited the church in Thessalonica in an official capacity as a representative of the apostle Paul.

The Bible says that we are members one of another. There is no indication that this principle is limited to local churches alone. We are to obey them that have the rule over us and submit ourselves.<sup>1</sup> Presbyterian churches take this seriously. As

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<sup>1</sup> Heb. 13:17

members of Christ's church we have a responsibility to submit not only to the undershepherds that Christ calls and the church ordains and installs into office, but also to the broader church. It is good that God does this, knowing that all persons are fallible and subject to error; all of us have need of spiritual oversight.

The various God-given institutions—the family, the church and the civil government—all, in one way or another, exercise oversight over the individual. This is part of our fifth commandment duty. And the oversight doesn't just flow in one direction; it is not only top-down. There is a sense in which the people in the pew exercise oversight over the pastor and elders. There is a sense in which the voters and members of the armed services exercise oversight over those who rule in human governments. And there is even a sense in which children exercise oversight over their parents, keeping them on the straight and narrow. The fifth commandment requires “the performing the duties belonging to everyone in their several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors or equals.”<sup>2</sup> A well-running, peaceful society requires general oversight and accountability. No human being is beyond accountability—the Bible nowhere provides for a Pope! But the fact is that it is good for all human beings to be mutually dependent on one another and mutually responsible to one another.

Jesus claimed that “all” power in heaven and earth has been given to him as the mediatorial King. This is power that nobody else could ever have. No higher court can overturn Christ's judgments. At the final day he will be vindicated. It will be shown that his judgments were flawless and perfect. “Righteous art thou, O LORD, and upright are thy judgments” (Ps. 119:137). End of discussion!

All of us ought to earnestly desire to receive a good report from the Judge of all the earth at the final day. We ought to live in light of Christ's soon coming. Secondly, consider

## **2. Faith and love**

Paul is overjoyed that Timothy, his son in the faith, has returned from his journey and brought good news of the Thessalonians' “faith and love.”

What is faith? The Shorter Catechism defines it as “a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.”<sup>3</sup> Faith is thus a saving grace, that is, an attitude of heart, produced by the Holy Spirit of God, given to the undeserving sinner as a free gift. It is not something that a person dead in trespasses and sins conjures up within himself. Faith is not the sinner's gift *to* God; rather, it is a divine gift received *from* God. It is a saving *grace*—grace that has been received as a free gift from God's blessed Holy Spirit. Has God given you the gift of faith? That is a very important question. The Bible says, “without faith it is impossible to please him.” Faith is the key that unlocks

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<sup>2</sup> SC 64, <https://www.opc.org/sc.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://opc.org/sc.html> accessed 2-17-24

heaven's door. How can you know if you have faith? Your whole life is new! If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away. Everything has become new. Whereas before, you loved your sin and hated God, now you long to know him. You know that a relationship with God is life eternal and life abundant. God is your true portion. You earnestly desire fellowship with the living God more than anything else; that is more important to you than anything this world has to offer.

The apostle talks about faith and love—that is, faith in God and love to all the saints. These are the requirements of the first and second great commandments. When we are born again, our hearts are drawn to God. We love him, because he first loved us. The Bible says, “O love the LORD, all ye his saints” (Ps. 31:23). God doesn't want our obedience without our love. He wants us to love him with a willing heart and obey him as the fruit of a true faith. He says, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

He also wants us to love our fellow saints—our brothers and sisters in Christ. John is right to the point: “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (1 John 4:20–21).

Love is the fulfilling of the law. Man is obligated to love God supremely and to love his neighbor. The Thessalonian Christians obeyed this, loving God and their neighbors. The Thessalonian Christians showed their love and respect for the apostle Paul and their church leaders by the high regard that they had for them. Paul makes a special point of saying, “you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you.” If we love our fellow saints, our hearts are drawn to them. We greatly desire to see them. We don't want to live solitary lives. We want to live in fellowship with the saints. The Christian faith was meant to be practiced in community.

Are you strong in faith? Is your love for God and his people continuing to grow? If you are born again, you will deeply care about these questions. You will make it your aim to have a strong faith in God and a strong love for his people.

The apostle Paul wasn't content to see that the Thessalonians had a strong *theoretical* faith—careful, exacting, abstract knowledge of fine points of theology. He wanted to see their faith lived out *in practice*, with love for God and love for the saints. Kevin DeYoung has observed that many Americans “think they can have Jesus without the church.” This, of course, is untrue. The Christian faith is a package deal: we get both Christ *and* his church. We do not get the Head without the body. The head is perfect; the body, this side of Glory, has not yet attained perfection. That will happen one day, but it has not happened yet. Sometimes, getting along with other Christians is challenging. If only our fellow Christians had

no other opinions than those of Jesus Christ! It's our private opinions that get us into trouble. "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12). In heaven, all our opinions will be correct and right. That day is coming, and in the meantime, we must pray for patience.

Are you committed to the body? Do you love the church? "Christ . . . loved the church, and gave himself for it." We must love it too. It is God's will for our lives to have faith in Christ and love for his church. Thirdly, consider

### **3. Intercessory prayer**

Paul writes: "What thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God, night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith?"

Obviously Paul is thankful for the church. It is for him a source of unspeakable joy and rejoicing. It is also a source of concern. Paul is a pastor and spiritual father. What encourages a pastor most is what encourages a godly father: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 4).

An earthly father stays up late, until all his children are safely home; then he can go to sleep. In the same way Paul is concerned about his spiritual sons and daughters. He comes before God "night and day praying exceedingly." The ESV has "we pray most *earnestly* night and day." The Thessalonian Christians were the subject of Paul's earnest prayers night and day. Paul did not pray halfheartedly; he prayed earnestly. He realized, as did Samuel in the Old Testament, his responsibility, as a spiritual father, to intercede for his sons and daughters in the faith. At the close of his ministry Samuel had said to the people of Israel, "Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you; but I will teach you the good and the right way" (1 Sam. 12:23).

Godly pastors and elders pray for their people. They are like Moses, who lifted up his hands to intercede for Israel as it engaged in battle. When Moses lifted up his hands, Israel prevailed, and when he let down his hands, Amalek prevailed. In this world there are many spiritual dangers that surround God's people. The world constantly seeks to draw us in with its enticements. Godly parents and elders need to pray for our people.

One very worrisome trend is that the majority of young people are in full agreement with the homosexual agenda. Most young people have grown up ignorant of God's law. They have learned moral relativism at the elementary, high school and college levels. They are biased against biblical morality. They have been trained to make fun of the book of Leviticus as outmoded and unenlightened and constricting. It is amazing how quickly this attitude took hold on American youth. When Barack Obama ran for president, he was opposed to same-sex

marriage. During his presidency he changed his mind. Within the last 15 or 20 years same-sex “marriage” has become widely accepted.

Of course the Christian’s supreme loyalty is to Christ. The law of Christ does not change. Our Lord clearly said that “from the beginning God made man male and female.” His law is true, virtuous, perfect. A lot of young people today hear Christ’s teaching and think he is bigoted. But Christ is *not* bigoted. He gave his law for our good, knowing that it was for the thriving of the human race. He is much wiser than we. Whatever God’s law teaches about any particular subject is true and right and moral. To oppose God law is to oppose Christ. Young people need to be informed that someday they will give account to Christ, who will sit as judge. And if they have ridiculed and berated Christ’s law, they are on the wrong side. When Christ sits as judge, some will go to everlasting punishment, while the righteous will go to life eternal. The only way to go to life eternal is to have the perfect righteousness of Christ credited to us, and received by faith alone. A lot of young people today may not like that truth, but it is the truth—the truth by which we will all be judged.

There’s not a lot of good news in the world today. We live in a world that has been ruined by the fall. It has lost its pristine perfection and innocence. “The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery.” By God’s common grace he allows mankind to survive and even thrive.

The Thessalonian Christians recognized that the apostle Paul was a man of God. As they heard his preaching, their hearts resonated with the truth of God. It was exactly what they needed. Paul had come to Thessalonica to show the people there the way of salvation.

The Bible tells us that the spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are the children of God.<sup>4</sup> As the born-again Christian hears the word of God preached and proclaimed and taught, he is drawn to that teaching. It resonates with him. He knows deep in his soul that what he is hearing is God’s truth.

I saw an article yesterday about an atheist who makes the preposterous claim that there is no evidence that Jesus even existed. The fact is, there is more evidence for the existence and miracles of Jesus than for any other ancient historical figure.

Those who have been born again intuitively understand the truth of the gospel: we are all dirty rotten sinners who have spit in the face of God. We have broken his commandments. We have loved our sin. We will not give it up. We want nothing to do with God. We are defiant and refuse to submit to his holy law. We deny that we are sinners. We think we are good people. We think that we *deserve* salvation. We think that God *owes* us salvation! When we hear the gospel, we learn that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.

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<sup>4</sup> Rom. 8:16

In our Old Testament text we see that Joab, captain of David's army, having successfully put down Absalom's rebellion, was reticent to tell David, because David's son Absalom had been killed in the battle. Ahimaaz the son of Zadok had wanted to deliver the news to David, but Joab did not want him to, for he knew David would be heartbroken. Not all news that comes from a far country is good news!

The most encouraging news of all: in a dark world the Spirit of God is making disciples. Christ has not given up on his promise to build the church such that the gates of hell will never prevail against it!

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. He was buried, and he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. That is the best news of all!

What encourages a pastor most is a people strong in faith and love for God and his people. Amen.