

Standing Firm

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[0 : 00] So we're going to spend a few moments looking at those verses that we read in Thessalonians 6 to 13. Now, this time of year is the best time of year for walking, in my opinion.

And I'm not thinking about the long, light days, and I'm not even thinking about the occasional sunshine beating down on your face. I'm thinking about the potential for food pit stops along the way.

As I walk around the green, green grass of Gilmerton, I'm always on this lookout for some raspberry bushes. And every time I go, I think, oh, how's it coming on? How's it coming on?

Then I'll go next week, oh, just about there, just about there. Then eventually the raspberries will start growing and then you can just stop and munch away, walk a bit, stop and munch away. It's great because you're seeing growth right before your eyes.

You're witnessing it in nature and you're excited about what's coming next. Are they going to be ready yet? It's like donkey. Are we nearly there yet? Are they nearly there yet?

[1 : 05] And this passage is all about the excitement of seeing growth, of seeing real life spiritual growth in the lives of ordinary men and women, boys and girls.

You see, in the passage, Paul is clocking the spiritual growth that he is seeing within the church at Thessalonica. And, you know, it was unfortunate and this really pained Paul. He wasn't able to see it for himself.

He wasn't able to see them up close. He had to send his comrade Timothy to go and to check up and see how they were doing.

And what we have here is Paul's response to Timothy's report and it's an amazing report. Timothy tells Paul how wonderfully the Thessalonian believers are growing in their faith and in their love.

And it's a growth that Paul could never have imagined or could have dreamed about. And so what we're going to be looking at this morning is that we're going to be looking at a great report card and we're going to get a real excitement from it.

[2 : 14] And we're going to be really encouraged by it. And what we're going to do is we're going to divide it up into three sections. So, verses 6 to 8, if you've got your Bible even open, you're going to see encouraged by growth in 6 to 8.

Then in verses 9 to 10, you're going to see responding to growth. And then finally, in verses 11 to 13, you're going to see that it's a prayer for continued growth.

So, encouraged by growth, verses 6 to 8, one of the things I loved about being a teacher was seeing growth in my pupils.

So naturally, you would sit down with your higher class. It was always with my higher class that this happened. And you would start explaining what the year ahead had in store for them. And basically, it totally deflated them, it totally flattened them. Hands on their head, they just thought, oh, how on earth am I going to do these exams?

But over the year, you see them growing in confidence. Sometimes it's too much. And you're beginning to see how they're becoming quite skilled and they're becoming increasingly confident as they tackle the questions that the exam board set.

[3 : 37] And so it's beautiful to see this growing sense of confidence within them. And as a teacher, that's kind of what keeps you going. That's what kind of fuels you in the morning.

And in the passage here that we've read, we have Paul seeing the growth of the church which he had founded in Thessalonica.

And he is, and he's brimming with joy. He's really delighted. He is really encouraged by the growth that he has seen.

You know, Paul hadn't spent a lot of time with this church. They had only been together a short time. But yet when he hears the joyful report from Timothy of their growth and faith and love, oh, he's over the moon.

He is so delighted that they are walking in faith and in love. But why is that such good news to Paul? Why is their growth and faith and love so encouraging to Paul?

[4 : 43] Why does he delight in this news so intensely? Well, faith and love are the distinctive characteristics of the Christian faith. They are the marks of those who love God and who have faith in Jesus.

Growth and faith and love shows that even in their tough situation, in their suffering situation, that they have not been thrown off track. They have not been tempted to leave the faith, but they've remained strong and they've remained faithful. And that filled Paul with joy.

Faith and love, it's our DNA as Christians, isn't it? Growing and faith, what does that mean? Well, growing and faith means I want to deepen my trust in God.

You grow in faith, you want to deepen your trust in God. Growing and love, you want to love others more genuinely. The Thessalonians are building and strengthening their relationships with God and with each other and with others.

And Paul calls them out for this. Paul is really delighted. Paul is really encouraged by this report. You see, Paul regarded growth in faith and love as what life is all about.

[6 : 15] Life for the Christian should only ever be about growth and faith and love. And when Paul sees this in his church family, amongst the church community, he's over the moon.

But what would this look like today? What might growing in faith look like for you and for me today? It might look something like this. You're having a tricky spot in a relationship.

You want to shout out and get angry. You want to say, ah, come on, I'm right. But as you grow in faith, what happens?

You struggle harder against the reaction to be angry and to prove yourself right. To grow in faith in that moment is to commit the situation to God, is to pray first and ask for God's help.

You are becoming more determined to let God speak into the situation rather than just to react in that moment. Or could it be that growing in faith looks something like this?

[7 : 25] That you've made an attempt to sit down with your Bible in the morning. But to grow in faith is maybe you think, OK, maybe just a couple more minutes to reflect. Just a few.

And then maybe to grow in faith is that you try to train yourself to think about what you've just read in different parts of your daily life.

To grow in love might be something as simple as inviting your neighbour round for a coffee outside. And you just get a chat and getting to know them. That's growing in love.

Or it might be something like, I don't really know that person in church. Let's have them over. Let's have them round and let's begin to get to know them. That's what growing in love is.

Growth so often happens in the quiet moments of everyday life, doesn't it? And it comes in little stages and in little steps forward.

[8 : 30] So often I aim for big spectacular leaps forward. But actually when I expect that, I often miss and become disheartened.

But I think growth in faith and in love is just like step by step. Or sometimes it's maybe just baby step by baby step.

So check out verse eight. Have a look at verse eight. It's phenomenal. Because this is really surprising. You see, when you grow in faith and love, this encourages other people in the church as well.

We can too easily compartmentalise our faith too. Kind of a very individualistic thing. But there's a community aspect to our growth and faith and love, which Paul kind of enjoys here.

Because when Paul hears about the growth in love and others, he is encouraged. And he is encouraged even within his suffering.

[9 : 37] What does verse eight say? For now we live if you are standing fast in the Lord. For now we really live since you are standing firm in the Lord.

This is so over the top. For now we live. Paul is using resurrection language here. He is saying, when I heard that you were growing in faith and love and had not been tempted to turn away, it felt like I had been reborn.

The depth of connection between the Thessalonians and Paul really comes out in this verse. You know, Paul is like the anxious parent who is waiting for news.

Their life has been put on pause as they expectantly wait for news. Time has stood still and he waits and he waits.

But Timothy comes with a great report. And it's like, it's as if Paul can breathe. And they're like, wow, his children are growing in health, the relationships with God and with one another.

[10:47] They were standing fast and because they were standing fast, he could face another day. He could keep on going on even in the midst of suffering because the family were growing in faith and love.

Do we get excited when we see the family growing in faith and love? You know, I think we kind of maybe expect greater things than we really kind of need to.

Because growing in faith and love could be something simple like this. Your teenager, your teenage son or daughter decides to come off their TikTok and they decide to read the Bible up. That's growth in faith.

Your young professional decides to keep appropriate hours at the office and decides to come to the prayer meeting or comes to discipleship. That's growth in faith and in love.

Your middle-aged family who are busy with family and jobs take time to invite people around to read the Bible to pray with others.

[11:55] That's growth in faith and love. The older community who decide not to pursue a life of pleasure but decide to serve their community and love and their church family.

That's growth in love and growth in faith. Faith's much more like Paul, let's call out, let's get excited, let's say, wow, you're growing in faith and love.

Let's share it with one another, let's encourage one another. Let's get out your phones and ping a text and say, oh, I'm really so blessed by the fact that you spent just a little bit of time speaking to me at church today.

I'm so thankful that you take time to lead the kids ministry. I'm so thankful that you're such a great neighbour. Let's take time to show our appreciation to one another, to encourage one another on the road.

Growth in faith and love is just the little things of every day which we can overlook, but it's vital that we see it just as ordinary.

[13:01] So we've seen Paul being really encouraged by the growth. Now, how does he respond to the growth? This is what we have in verses 9 to 10.

How does Paul respond to the growth? It's that moment of stunned silence. As you try to get your head round what's just happened.

After a few moments, you're overcome with thankfulness and you just say thank you in a thousand different ways. You're overwhelmed in that moment at the kindness of the other towards you. And it's this kind of amazement that Paul is experiencing here as he writes. And Paul responds how?

Paul responds verse 9. For what thanksgiving can we return to God? Paul knows that the place where he needs to go to give thanks for the growth in the faith and love is to God himself.

[14:14] I don't know about you, but I'm so challenged by that posture. Paul on seeing the flourishing of the church in Thessalonica is all thanks to God.

Paul allowed himself to be used by God. And that's amazing, but it's God that is doing all the work here.

It was God who gave them the new life. It was God who caused them to grow in faith and love. It was God who kept them standing strong. And so Paul humbles himself and says thank you to God. You see, Paul's soul is flooded with gratitude and he is deeply aware that he cannot give anything back to God which would in any way repay God for the refreshment to his soul on hearing the news that his brothers and sisters were growing in faith and love.

He's so excited and thankful in this letter, but you also see the pastor at the forefront in Paul's mind. Yes, it's all God, but God had put Paul and this church together.

[15:31] He had bound them together and Paul really wanted to be with them again. He loves the church deeply and he really exemplifies what he is grateful for in the church of Thessalonica.

He has this love for them. He asks God, he prays to God on their behalf night and day frequently. Paul is praying for this church.

You see, prayer is such a powerful example of love. And in his love, Paul prays, what does he pray? That he just basically prays that he can be with them again.

He is so dedicated to them, he wants to be with them. He wants to enjoy time, face to face time. He wants to laugh with them, he wants to cry with them.

He wants to share stories with them. He just wants to be back in their company. That's the first part of the prayer. But there's another thing he says, and this is in verse 10.

[16:42] Paul prayed for their growth. As we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith.

You see, the church still had areas of growth. And Paul wanted to come and to help them grow. He wanted to come to help them know even more about how wonderful Jesus is.

And he wanted them to grow again in faith and in love, to continue as disciples. You see, discipleship is an ongoing journey, isn't it?

And Paul knew it and so did the Thessalonians. And it's an area that we too must embrace and enjoy. And we need to ask ourselves this, we need to take stock as to how much of a priority discipleship is in our life.

Is it our number one priority? Or do we choose to overlook it for now to accommodate the pursuit of other pleasures? For example.

[17:48] And so maybe it's a good time now to pause to reflect, is discipleship my number one goal? And maybe it's time to help one another if it's a struggle to us at the moment.

It might be something simple. Like choose a book and say to your pal, okay I'm going to read a book, let's say Gentle and Lowly, or a book of the Bible.

Mark, let's read two chapters and we'll meet up every three weeks and we'll just spend 10 minutes chatting about it. Just these simple things which kind of just help us all kind of pursue discipleship, pursue getting to know Jesus, pursuing that growth and faith and in love.

But I want you to notice something and I wonder if you noticed what happened during Paul's prayer. Have a look at those, at that verse again, verse 10.

Have a look, as we pray most earnestly night and day, that we may see you face to face and supply what's lacking in your faith. Do you see something that's going on in there?

[18:59] Have a look. He starts praying for them all and all of a sudden he wants to serve them.

He prays that they'll be together again, that they'll be in each other's company, but then his prayer moves to service. So I can encourage you so I can help you.

So that I can supply what is lacking in your faith. He prays that they'll be together again, but then he prays that he'd be able to serve them.

He was moved to disciple them. This is the remarkable thing about praying for others. When we pray for others, we'll soon find ourselves wanting to serve them, wanting to bless them, so we can help them move and help ourselves move towards one another and towards God out of love and in faith.

So as you pray for one another, don't be surprised if you'll be moved to serve one another. It's what should happen. So we've seen Paul encouraged by the growth.

We've seen how he responded to the growth. And then finally and briefly, verses 11 to 13, he prays for continued growth.

[20:18] Now, I'm sure some of you have caught some of the Olympics last week or so. And I was kind of listening and reading around the story of Adam Peaty.

He's the kind of Olympic swimmer who's the kind of Usain Bolt of the pool. You know, he is expected to get gold. He will get gold. There's nothing that really stopped him getting gold.

But he explains and his team explained that that's not enough for Adam Peaty to keep growing and to keep pushing himself. It's not the gold medal. That's too easy.

It's about the world record. He needs to keep pushing and pushing and pushing himself. He needs to continue to grow in the skill of being an Olympic athlete. And you know, that same desire to grow should be within each one of us in terms of our spiritual growth.

A process fueled by God's grace, but needing self-discipline to cultivate great spiritual habits is vital for our continued spiritual growth.

[21:29] So Paul pens a prayer in this letter to the Thessalonians. And what does he pray for? And this is really interesting.

Because you're thinking, Paul, oh, he'll mention something about doctrine and he will. But what's the most important thing to Paul? I think that you'll find it in verse 12, that they would continue to grow in love for each other and for everyone else.

Growth in love. This is dynamite to the Thessalonian. Because in Thessalonica, what happens? How do you, how do relationships work?

Well, in Thessalonica, Thessalonica, what you do is to build relationships. You serve others in the hope that they will give you something back.

It's basically a society which is built on this hierarchy. So you serve those who are up the ladder hoping that they help you up the ladder even more.

[22 : 38] You wouldn't dream of building relationships with your peers or with your equals because they can't get you where you want to be.

And I think that's also true in many of our relationships today. I'm sure a number of us can retell of similar situations, experiences.

Experiences of being used by others for someone else's gain. Perhaps you've had that partner who was committed to you until things got hard and then they decided to, that was a time, time up, I'm off.

Or maybe it was the time where you were sweet talked by your boss into doing additional work and additional hours just to help you get that promotion.

But the promotion never came. Or maybe it was those friendships who only liked you, only hung out with you because you had access to other friends.

[23 : 41] So you were used and so you were left exposed and used. But the good news for us today is that there is a love which is all about giving and not about receiving.

There is a love out there which does not take from you but only gives to you. And this small group of Christians had experienced that kind of love.

And that kind of love can be experienced even today. And it's a kind of love which led that group, that small group of Christian believers to be deeply committed to loving all people.

Not for return, not for gain but out of joy, out of a conviction that all people were deserving of love.

And that real love was not about being served, what was about serving others.

You see, the church in Thessalonica, you see, the church now was captivated by the love of God.

And they were so transformed by it that they wanted to share that love with others.

[24 : 57] They chose and we choose to pursue the self-giving love of God, which was most clearly displayed through the person of Jesus on the cross.

You know that same love still captivates and captures hearts today. It's a love which enables followers of Jesus to genuinely love others in response to the incredible love which he has shown to us daily.

However, in a world that is often dismissive of our beliefs, it's hard, isn't it, to display Christ's love?

It's hard to keep doing the self-giving love of Jesus. And that's why Paul prays, he prays for them.

The Lord in verse 12 may make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all as we do for you.

[26 : 04] Paul knows and we know that our hearts can often be fickle. Whilst acknowledging in one moment how amazing it is to be recipients of God's love, we can then quickly forget and begin to embrace self-love or selfishness in a heartbeat.

That's why Paul continues to pray that they continue to grow, that they continue to be strengthened by God in verse 13. Paul prays that their hearts would not be divided but that they would continue right until the very end, until the coming of Jesus at the end of time.

Our prayers too for one another must have this eternal view. We want to pray that we would all keep looking to Jesus right until the very end, that our hearts would not be divided but would be wholly committed to Jesus.

In conclusion then, we have seen how encouraging, how encouraged Paul was by the growth. We have seen how he responded to that growth and we see how he prayed that they would continue to grow.

You see, Paul was a man who was really encouraged by the growth of Christians around him and he responded with thankfulness and with a desire to serve.

[27 : 41] And finally, he continues to pray that they would keep on going right until the end. I pray that too is our posture, a posture of encouragement and of thankfulness to God for all he's doing in

our life and in the life of our brothers and sisters.

Encouraging one another, praying for one another right till the very end. Amen. Let's finish with a quick prayer. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, thank you that you love us. Thank you that our hearts have been transformed. Lord, we pray that our hearts would not be divided but that they would be wholly committed to you right until the very end. Amen.