THE JOY OF BIBLE TEACHING

1 Thessalonians 2:1-20
Key Verse: 2:19-20

“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? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.”

In the last passage, St. Paul described the faith of the Thessalonian church. After only three weeks of Bible study with St. Paul, the Thessalonians turned aside from their idols of money and fame, and began to serve the living God. Their struggle to imitate St. Paul by enduring hardship and loving one another shows that the Thessalonians had true fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. As a result they became a model for Christians everywhere who are waiting for the Son’s return from heaven. And the Lord’s message rang out from them into all of Macedonia and Achaia. Through their example we learned that faith is not abstract or intellectual. Faith is God’s gift to those who believe, enabling us to endure hardship, practice divine love, and live purely while we wait on his Son Jesus’ return from heaven. In today’s passage, we learn that the Thessalonians did not become model believers by accident. They were the fruit of St. Paul’s heartfelt prayers for them. St. Paul was not married. So he had no children. But the Thessalonian believers became St. Paul’s precious children by the grace of God. From St. Paul we can learn the motivation and heart of a shepherd of God’s flock. Most of all, we can learn from him the source of true joy and glory which all human beings long to have. Let’s study this passage carefully, and learn from St. Paul the secret of being joyful while living in this difficult world.

First, men approved by God (1-6a). As we have studied, Paul, Silas and Timothy came to Thessalonica on Paul’s second missionary journey, after Paul had seen a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading for him to come and help them. Paul and his friends faced great obstacles in preaching the gospel there. In Philippi, Paul was followed around by one slave girl who had been possessed by a demon. Her owner had tried to use her condition in order to make money, claiming that she could foresee the future. Out of his compassion, Paul drove the demon from the girl. But her owner became angry to lose his income from her, and he incited a mob against Paul and Silas, so that they were beaten and then thrown into jail. Paul and Silas were naked, bleeding and in chains. But that night in prison, they did not cry over their broken noses and scraped chins. They were singing hymns together: “Joyful, joyful we adore Thee, ....” All the prisoners were listening, and the jailer as well. Suddenly, a large earthquake struck, so that the jail doors burst open and the prisoners’ chains fell off. The jailer, fearing a prisoner revolt, was going to take his own life, but Paul and Silas took charge of the prisoners, and comforted the jailer. Then the jailer invited Paul and Silas to eat with him and his family, and he and his family members all were baptized and believed in Jesus as the Christ. When the town’s officials heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they humbly came and escorted them out of the town. Look at verses 1 and 2, “You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but by the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.” It was not easy for Paul and the others to continue to preach the gospel to the Gentiles in the face of near universal persecution and rejection. But they dared to tell the gospel message to the Thessalonians, overcoming many obstacles, and their ministry bore abundant fruit to God.

Paul introduces the circumstances under which he preached to the Thessalonians as indicators of Paul’s sincerity in preaching to them the gospel. Look at verses 3-4. “For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motive, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.” Paul invites the
Thessalonians to consider their motive in preaching to them. They endured extreme hardship as they served the Thessalonians night and day (9). Yet they made no attempt to get any money from them, nor to flatter them with nice sounding words (5). Instead, they served the Thessalonians before God in order to please God. As a result, they taught them the word of God plainly and clearly, and the Thessalonians were led to repent of their wicked lives and idolatry, and to believe in the Son and serve the living and true God (1:9).

In order to illustrate the importance of one’s motive, Jesus told the story of two shepherds (Jn 10). One shepherd loved his sheep. He knew each one of them by name, and faithfully called them out every day to the best pastureland, where they could graze freely and in safety under his watchful eye. At night, he would bring them in to the sheep pen, and he himself would lay across the entrance to the pen, so that no marauder could come in. This shepherd was the gate for the sheep. This shepherd was willing to lay down his life for the sheep. Sheep are not so smart. And they can’t see beyond the grass in front of their noses. But they knew who their shepherd was, and they listened to his voice and followed him. Jesus said that he is that shepherd. Jesus came to this world so that his sheep might be saved from judgment, and have life abundantly. The other shepherd also watched over his sheep. But he was only a hired hand. At the job interview, he was very charming and appealing. But once he got the job, he didn’t give his heart to the sheep. He thought about how he could take it easy, and enjoy himself. He only worked hard when his boss was looking. One day, several wolves came up out of the wilderness to attack the flock. The hired hand took off like a hundred meter track runner, because he cared nothing for the sheep. He only wanted to save his own skin. Then the wolves came and scattered the flock. Paul, Silas and Timothy did not come to the Thessalonians looking for some benefit or reward from them. They came as servants of God and of their good shepherd, Jesus, who had laid down his life on the cross for them. They appealed to the Thessalonians to hear the gospel message and believe so that they too might please God and become the sheep of Jesus’ pasture. Here we are reminded of John 7:18. “He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him.”

Second, a labor of love (6b-12). Paul was in his rights as a servant of God to expect that the Thessalonians would support him and his company while he risked his life to serve them. But Paul renounced all his rights in order care for the Thessalonian believers, like a mother caring for her little children. Look at verse 8. “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.” The characteristic of a mother is sacrificial giving. When a mother gives birth, her child becomes the most precious thing to her, so that her husband feels a little sorry for himself. Her one desire is to see her children grow healthily and happily. So she faithfully feeds her children and cares for them, not worrying about her self or what she is going to eat. She does not expect her children to support her, but she is ready to help them in any circumstance. Her greatest joy is when her children are recognized as the most wonderful and intelligent children on the face of the earth. In order to care for the Thessalonian sheep and not burden them, Paul and Silas worked night and day, making tents and working odd jobs, so that everyone could be free to hear the gospel message and grow in faith and love in Jesus. Look at verse 9. “Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.” Like a mother feeding her children, Paul and Silas fed the Thessalonians with the word of God to help them grow healthy and strong in Jesus. In fact, they were serving them with their very lives (8).

Look at verses 10-12. “You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own
children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God who calls you into his kingdom and glory.” As Paul was serving the Thessalonian believers, he had a glorious vision for them, like that of Jesus Christ. Paul wanted to see all the Thessalonians become mature and useful servants of God who are confident of their reward in heaven. Paul wanted them to share in the glory that he knew he would receive from Jesus in his kingdom. But Paul knew that all people are too weak in their natural selves to live up to the calling of God. So Paul cared for the Thessalonian believers like a father caring for his own children, to help them live lives worthy of God. A father’s characteristic is to discipline his children for their future success. Sometimes a father must use physical punishment to restrain his children’s selfish nature. More often, a father must set a personal example of discipline and restraint so that his children may imitate him and grow strong against their sinful desires and Satan’s temptations and trials. Paul, Silas and Timothy disciplined themselves in Bible study, in prayer and in speech, so that in every way they might give a good example to the Thessalonian believers and help them know how to live up to God’s high calling for them. They spent time with each of their sheep in order to help them put into practice Bible faith by living a life worthy of a child of God. In this, they were following the example of our Lord Jesus. John 17:17-19 says, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.” Here we learn that the shepherds of God’s flock must see God’s sheep as their children, and faithfully teach them the word of God and put the word of God into practice, so that their sheep might grow and become useful shepherds for their Father God.

Third, the result of believing in God’s word (13-16). Look at verse 13. “And we also thank God continually, because when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God which is at work in you who believe.” The Thessalonians did not listen to the word of God intellectually, or close their hearts to the message because Paul was a Jew, or that he was balding or short. They saw the word of God at work in Paul and his companions. So they listened to the gospel message and accepted that it was God’s truth for them to obey. When they listened to the gospel message as the words of God, an amazing thing happened. God’s word came into their hearts, and began to work in them all by itself. They were convinced that Jesus was the Christ. They began to love one another dearly, like brothers and sisters in God. They overcame their personal weaknesses and failures, and began to win victory after victory for God. They became precious servants and coworkers in God’s world salvation work around the world.

Many people have complicated ideas about the word of God. But such people never experience God’s word at work in them. One young minister from a mainline church was quoted in Newsweek as saying, “The Bible is more than 2000 years old. I’m not going to conform my life to a 2,000 year old book.” Fittingly, he was quoted anonymously. He is a man of the world who cannot get out of the one dimensional material world. But the Reverend Billy Graham decided that he was going to teach the word of God as it is, the word of God. To many, his style of teaching was too simple, and they dismissed him as a nobody. But when Dr. Graham faithfully taught the word of God as it is, the word of God began to work in him and through him. Millions of people came to listen to his messages, and many repented in tears and believed in Jesus as the Christ. He became an advisor to six US presidents, and he established a worldwide Christian ministry. Dr. Graham’s faith in the word of God was indeed well-founded. Interestingly, when he was recently asked what he would do if he could live his life over again, he said that he would run a mass evangelistic ministry, but he would teach the Bible one to one to raise up disciples of Jesus. One to One Bible study is slow and painstaking. But the world’s greatest evangelist recognizes it as the best method to teach the Bible and help God’s flock to listen to the word of God as it actually is, the word of God.
The Thessalonian Christians were born again when they listened to the word of God and believed (Jn 5:24). They were so joyful and ready to share their faith with the world. And indeed, the Lord’s message rang out from them into all Macedonia and Achaia. However, not everyone was happy at the Thessalonians’ change. Their own countrymen persecuted them for abandoning their own culture and idols for a dead man, Jesus. And the Jews persecuted them for being uncircumcised Gentiles, who had no right to be children of God. But the fault was not with them. Simply by believing in the gospel message, they became targets in the fight between God and the enemies of God. The world does not want us to be changed. The world is not happy if we are born again. But when we listen to the word of God and are born again through our faith in Jesus, we can experience life changing power and a living hope in God.

Fourth, “you are our glory and joy” (17-20). After three brief weeks, Paul, Silas and Timothy were forced to leave Thessalonica. But Paul’s motherly and fatherly concern did not end there. Paul heard of their difficulties and struggles, and his thoughts turned to them often in his prayers. Clearly, Paul felt that his work among the Thessalonian believers was not finished. Look at verses 19 and 20. “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 again? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.” Here Paul summarizes his motivation and hope in serving the Thessalonian believers. Paul looked forward to that glorious day when Jesus comes again and finds many eager and faithful children waiting for his return and ready to go with him to their heavenly home in God’s kingdom. Paul was so joyful to think that these Thessalonians, who were once enemies of God in their sins and rebellion, would be welcomed into God’s kingdom as God’s precious children. It was because of what Jesus had done for them by dying on the cross, shedding his blood as the ransom sacrifice for their sins. But Paul was so thankful that Jesus had entrusted him the task of telling them what Jesus had done. And Paul believed that Jesus would reward him for carrying out his holy mission faithfully and with all of his heart.

From Paul’s glorious vision of a heavenly reunion in the kingdom of God, we learn several things. Firstly, true joy comes when we serve others in Jesus. Everyone likes joyful people. Everyone wants to be joyful. So they work hard to build up their lives in the world so that they can have joy even for a moment. But worldly joy does not satisfy man’s soul. Worldly joy cannot last. And so people make many plastic smiles, hoping that no one notices how miserable they really are. However, we can know the real source of joy when we look at the word “joy”. We can have real joy when we love Jesus first, others second, and yourself last. Jesus, others, yourself – that’s Joy! Paul was gushing with thankfulness and joy, because he found the secret of joy in serving others in Jesus. Secondly, our true joy comes when Jesus comes again. Paul was anxious for his Thessalonian sheep. It was because in this world, nothing is stable or secure. Satan is lurking around, like a lion ready to devour his prey (1 Pe 5:8). So Paul was alert to the difficulties the Thessalonians were going through. Paul’s job as mother and father and shepherd was never done. He would have to keep fighting until the Lord Jesus brought him safely home. In 2 Timothy 4:7.8 he says, “I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith, I have finished the race. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.”

May God bless you to experience the true joy of serving others in Jesus. When we want to serve others in Jesus, we must be ready to teach them the Bible as the word of God, and show them the example of a holy life in Jesus. Most of all, we must love even unlovely people with the love of God until they become our spiritual children and our glory when Jesus comes again to reward his servants.