

“Keep Growing Up!”

Introduction: As I was walking through the Raleigh-Durham airport a couple of weeks ago, en route to what turned out to be a wonderful pastor’s retreat at the Billy Graham Center in Asheville, followed by a few days with my dad, I happened to catch the end of a conversation between parents and their two daughters as the girls were about to depart for who knows where. After hugs all around, I heard the father say, as the girls began to walk away, “keep growing up!” I recognized in that statement a whole bunch of parental love and concern, a love and concern which recognized that these girls were going to keep growing up apart from their parents, that they would face challenges along the way, and that their parents hoped they would grow in right and healthy ways. It’s part of what parents do...we love, but we also worry, a lot! Every mother here, I know, has spent time lying awake at night turning over in her mind all of the dreadful things that might happen to her children. We worry because we deeply love our children and desperately want what’s best for them.

We hear similar love and concern expressed by the apostle Paul as he writes to the congregation in Thessalonica. Sometimes Paul gets accused of simply being a cerebral, left-brained and logical, authoritative theologian. But if we read him carefully, we see in many places the deep bonding he enjoyed with the churches he founded, the emotional and family ties that he shared with them, and the fellowship of both mind and heart that characterized these relationships. Above all, Paul’s relationship with his churches was characterized by the familial love and concern of a parent for a child. What did this look like, and how might it help us to live more intentionally and fruitfully in our own family of faith?

I. Love - Orphaned

A. We get a sense of Paul’s deep love for these believers as he begins this section of his letter with a rather remarkable statement: “Brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time . . .” Already we’ve heard Paul describe his relationship with the Thessalonians as like a nursing mother who cares for her children, and a father who encourages, comforts, and urges his children on to live a life worthy of God (2:7-12). And throughout Paul refers to the members of the church using the family term “brothers and sisters.” Now, he adds the word “orphaned” to the mix. In English usage the term orphaned describes children who are without parents, but in Greek usage it can also refer to parents who found themselves having somehow lost their children.

B. Paul thus uses this term to describe how he felt “torn away” from this family of faith when he was forcibly made to leave Thessalonica, persecuted by those who didn’t like the fact that he had been calling into question the whole realm of idolatry in which the citizens of this city had been living, and declaring along with this that Israel’s Messiah had not only been crucified but was now the One Lord of the world. As a result, both Gentile and Jew should begin living together as a single family of faith. It was a recipe for social and cultural and even political upheaval, and it was turning their world upside down. Many didn’t like it, to say the least! Several times, Paul goes on to say, he tried to get back to see them, but Satan had blocked his way. Paul doesn’t tell us any of the specifics of how this happened. What is clear is that Paul saw the hand of the evil one, the one who opposed the purposes and the mission of God, behind it. Paul’s inability to return was not due to any indifference on his part. Even more, such a separation was not only painful but felt unnatural. “Orphaned,” was how he felt.

C. Family ties are remarkable, are they not? There is something in our genetic makeup, and our upbringing, that leads to do almost anything for a family member. “It’s family,” we say. But that this family imagery abounds in the writings of the NT is even more remarkable for in the ancient Near East, the idea of a single community in which people from different social, cultural, and racial backgrounds treated each other with the love appropriate within a family was unheard of, and even unthinkable. Yet in Jesus, Paul was proclaiming, a new kind of family had come into existence. Its identity came from Jesus. Its manner of living was shaped by Jesus. And its characteristic mark was a believing faith and allegiance to Jesus so that *all* who found themselves gripped by his grace would be welcome.

D. What’s more, Paul and the church in Thessalonica found themselves to be enjoying a kind of mutual joy, or reciprocal grace, as they lived within this new family of faith. There was an intense longing to be with one another. Paul talked about this congregation as his glory and joy, just like you would speak of your own children, and their memories in turn were pleasant of him, just like you hope your children might speak of you! As he had encouraged the flowering of their faith, seeing it actually flower encouraged him in return.

Illustration: How we might be on encouragement to one another? I know at least a few of our parents have become discouraged that there aren’t more kids here that are the same age as their children. I share that frustration. But at the same time, let’s not miss the wonderfully inter-generational way we can, and have, cared for our “family members.” [college kids babysitting; elders counseling youngers on issues ranging from budgeting to parenting; the Clark’s taking people into their home; young women coming alongside Thais during a high-school breakup].

II. Concern – Unsettled by Trials

A. Because of his love, we also hear of the concern that had begun to rise to the surface in Paul’s heart for this people, fueled by the distance he was apart from them, and the trials he knew they were facing: “For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain” (v. 5).

Unable personally to visit them, due to persecution that he himself was facing, Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica to check things out. “When we could stand it no longer” Paul twice writes (3:1, 5). It gives us clue as to the emotional bond that Paul had with this people. But Paul was 200 miles away from this city, and this was a time, remember, when there was no possibility of texting or emailing, or even just calling! Paul’s concern was that these folks were young in their faith, hence his desire to “supply what is lacking” (3:10). It’s not that they hadn’t come to faith, acknowledging their sin and their need for personal trust in the crucified and risen Jesus. It was the subsequent living out of that faith, or their faithfulness, with which Paul was concerned. Paul, like any loving parent, wanted his spiritual children to “keep growing up” appropriately, standing firm in their faith. In chapter 4, he will address two issues in particular – sex and work – which would have been especially challenging to them, given the culture in which they lived.

B. But for now, think about it in general terms. Given how radical the good news that Paul had been preaching must have been, given how radically they would have needed to change their life, the social pressures must have been immense to return to their old way of living, to what their neighbors and friends would have considered “normal.” For a Jew, to now consider that all God had been pointing toward from Abraham, and David, and the prophets, was now being fulfilled in a crucified and risen

Messiah, who was welcoming impure Gentiles to his table, would have been a huge stumbling block. And for a Gentile, it would have been hugely foolish to consider Paul's teaching that the gods which were everywhere in their life, and on virtually every street corner, were nothing but powerless and worthless idols.

C. "Can you really trust a God," the voices of family and friends and neighbors would whisper, "who let's himself get crucified?" "Can you really believe that this guy Jesus rose from the dead?" "Can you really stop bending your knee to Caesar, and give up all your wonderful idols, and pledge allegiance to the Jewish Messiah as your King?!" Paul knows this congregation will hear these voices because, as one who used to persecute followers of Jesus, he had heard them himself. What's more, Paul knows that behind these voices lurks the power of the tempter, and he can't bear the thought that all of his good work in Thessalonica might be destroyed by this evil one. And Paul also knows that the suffering they are encountering is not a strange thing that means God is unreliable; suffering and trials are precisely what one can expect if one is following Jesus and begins to experience the age to come breaking into this present age.

III. Prayer – Standing Firm

A. Thus, even after he hears the encouraging report from Timothy that these folks are standing firm in their faith, Paul doesn't forget about them and go on to other things. He prays. We see an outline of his prayer in vv. 11-13. It begins with a desire that their relationship with one another would grow, and that God, in Christ, would make that possible, eliminating any and all distractions. It ends with the hope of the return of Jesus, when God will bring heaven and earth together in his new creation, and prays that the members of the family of faith would be ready and prepared for that day. (More on that in chapter 5.) And it prays that in the meantime, in the present, their love would overflow for each other in their family of faith, and also out to those outside of that family, wooing their neighbor with the love that Jesus has for them.

B. For whom, we might ask, do we have that kind of concern, the kind of concern that seeks to keep another standing firm in his or her faith in the midst of all the social and cultural and political pressures we face in our own time, the kind of concern that seeks to supply what is lacking in their faith so that they will continue in faithfulness until Jesus returns? And, who has that kind of concern for us? If you look around you, you will find those people sitting right beside you! What might you do for one another? Well, how about beginning with prayer?

C. And as we pray, know that we can do so with confidence given the event the church celebrated last Thursday, which was Ascension Day. Our prayer rests in the reality that Jesus is not only risen but has been seated at the right hand of the glorious Father, who has placed all things under his Son's feet (Eph. 1:17-23). Because that's the case, we can pray, and live, with the confidence that the God who began a good work in us will carry it to completion until this Son returns. So let us celebrate that glorious sight and crown Jesus as King of kings as we sing.