

Marks of a Praiseworthy Church

By David Harrell

Bible Text: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-5
Preached on: Sunday, May 22, 2016

This morning we come to 2 Thessalonians, if you will take your Bibles and turn there with me. We have finished going through verse by verse 1 Thessalonians and now we come to 2 Thessalonians and this morning I want to address the issue of a praiseworthy church, marks of a praiseworthy church. We will be looking at the first five verses here in a few minutes but in order for us to wrap our minds around what I believe the Spirit of God would have me share with you this morning, I would like for you to think with me for a moment about just the nature of fallen flesh. We read about this a few minutes ago in Romans 1 and it's really one of the marks of our fallen flesh to have an inability to conform with the moral character and desires of God as well as have just therefore an inability to love what God loves and hate what he hates, and we see this most conclusively in unbelievers who have no capacity to discern spiritual truth; they have no moral compass as indicated in the moral freefall that we see in our country today, but even as believers, sometimes we have poor judgment. Unless we are Spirit controlled, unless we are walking in obedient fellowship with the Lord, it's easy for us to kind of wander off and begin to satisfy our flesh instead of presenting our bodies as a living and a holy sacrifice that's acceptable to God. We live for ourselves. We can live with little or no thought of what is acceptable and pleasing to God and the remnants of our fallen flesh can really cause us to place ourselves in the center of our own universe and expect everything to kind of orbit around it.

This is so easy to do in our culture. Our culture is basically a culture that exalts self, "Me, me, me. Mine, mine, mine. I'm the center of gravity." For example, "I have the right not to be offended." Right? You hear that all the time today and, of course, this has given rise to the absurdities of political correctness and the whole grievance industry that we see. Today, tolerance is far more virtuous than morality. I was reading how the Girl Scouts of Northeastern New York will now embrace a child who was born a boy but now identifies as a girl. It's going to be interesting. One of these days we'll drive down to Walmart and there will be effeminate looking little boys selling Girl Scout cookies. It's amazing, isn't it? Then, of course, only a deranged bigot would possibly disagree with such a position.

We have a political party today that slanders anyone with even common sense morality as it relates to homosexuality or transgenderism, the killing of unwanted babies. There is a group that basically labels those who object to the Islamic subversion of the United States and calls those people Islamophobics. They vilify anyone opposed to illegal immigration and they vilify those who reject the policies that would reward the forever needy, the chronically unemployed and so forth. And basically what people hear today and even our young people, what they hear today a lot is, "You're really not responsible and you are

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entitled to everything." And this plays into our depraved nature, doesn't it? Our depraved nature basically says, "I want to do what I want to do when I want to do it and if you have something that I want, I not only want it but I deserve it." And we can justify that in our minds. "Life is all about me." And like spoiled children, we want reward without responsibility.

Now, I give you that as just a little bit of a framework to set up where I'm going with this and that is how people choose a church. For example, think how the unregenerate people choose churches. Now, you might say, "Well, unregenerate people don't choose churches." Oh, yes they do. Most churches today are filled with unsaved people and most of them don't know it. The Lord makes this very clear in Matthew 7. But with this mindset, people come to a church and they ask questions like, "Well, what does this church offer me? Do the people look like me? Do they think like me? Are they tolerant? Are they politically correct so that I won't be offended? Do they make me feel happy? Do they make me feel important? Does this facility make me feel comfortable? Do they play my kind of music? Will they keep me entertained? Do they have programs for my kids and me that are appealing to me? Do they require anything of me or will they just leave me alone but be there when I need them? Will this church make me look good or bad with my friends? The bottom line: will this church meet my needs?"

Now, not that all of those attitudes are necessarily bad but, frankly, none of them are praiseworthy priorities from God's perspective. That would not be the list that God would give you and say, "Here, look for a church that does this." But as I said earlier, our flesh is not impressed with the things that God is impressed with. We're not impressed with his perspective and we are not naturally drawn to the things that are pleasing to him. We are by nature people that want to please ourselves. Increasing numbers of churches understand this. This kind of innate narcissism or selfishness, even though they might not label it as such but they cater to it. They purposefully make themselves appealing to the "unchurched" which is typically unbelievers or even very immature believers like Paul had to deal with. Remember in 1 Corinthians 3, he described them as men of flesh, babes in Christ; they were the spiritually immature, worldly saints; baby Christians that can only drink doctrinal milk, not solid food; they just never seem to grown up because, he said, they are fleshly, they are worldly, they are carnal. And sadly, this is the kind of church that young people are typically drawn to, kind of a church that is a religious version of hanging out in the mall or a religious version of going to a rock concert or to a sporting event. And many adults fall into that same trap. They go to a church where, frankly, the most important thing is their relationships where they can hang out with their friends and they can grow in relationship with each other but they really have no care for growing in relationship with the living God. They really don't want a church that has, for example, in-depth expository preaching and teaching and application of the word, the very

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thing that God promises that he is going to use to equip the saints for the work of ministry to produce doctrinal unity, to produce Christ-likeness and a church that is praiseworthy from God's perspective. Not really interested in that type of thing.

So, what are some of the things that makes a church worthy of God's praise? That is what we find emerging from the text before us. There are many things but five are mentioned here in the opening verses of Paul's second epistle to the Thessalonians. Let me give them to you and I will elaborate on them from the text. First of all, obvious regeneration. Secondly, increasing faith. Thirdly, growing love. Number 4, steadfast hope. And number 5, confident suffering.

Now, to put this in perspective, can you imagine your 16 year old running into the house saying, "Mom and Dad! I've found a church that has those five things. We really need to be a part of this church. Oh, how exciting!" Well, it's almost laughable and sadly most professing adults wouldn't even know to look for these kinds of things, much less consider them to be important, yet it's because of these things that the Apostle Paul said, "We ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God." So what a reputation to have, not at all impressive to the unsaved world or to the spiritually immature but profoundly commendable to God and a matter of spiritual life and death for saints who are craving for the glory and the majesty of God in the person of Christ. And I have to say with respect to Calvary Bible Church, I can say with all sincerity, although we are not at all what God would have us be, this is our heart. This is the passion of the leadership of this church and I would suggest most all of the membership. These are the marks of a praiseworthy church regardless of size, popularity, prestige, programs, traditions, facilities. This is the kind of church that honors God. This is the kind of church that really God uses to unleash great rivers of blessing from the infinite reservoir of his grace. And this is the kind of church that God uses to radically change lives by his saving and sanctifying grace.

Now, before we look at the text, let me give you the context. You probably knew that was coming. According to the superficial standards that make churches popular today, the Thessalonian church was woefully deficient. I mean, think about it, it had no building. No family life center. No gym. No comfortable seats. No nursery. No bathrooms. And worst of all, they had no coffee bar. In fact, church buildings didn't come into existence until about the third century AD; they met, for the most part, in open places, sometimes in large homes, under large porticoes and, of course, the weather in that region of the world was much more suitable for that kind of thing. They had no orchestras, no organs, no choirs, no worship bands, no hi-tech audio/visual enhancements. There was nothing about their worship services that was in any way entertaining. Nothing about them was seeker sensitive or user friendly. In fact, they would have considered it not only absurd but

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utterly blasphemous to design a worship service that would appeal to the spiritually dead that hated God, namely unbelievers. In fact, there was nothing about their gatherings that even focused on the unsaved or the unchurched. No youth groups. No Awana. No ministry programs. They didn't target certain segments of the society by zip code to minister to people who looked like them. In fact, it was made up of radically different opposing cultures that had formerly hated each other and now they're all gathered around the same table of fellowship. By the way, we're going to meet those folks some day. Won't that be something?

The text tells us that they were both rich and poor, Greeks, Romans, Macedonians, Jews and barbarians. Now they're all sharing from the same cup of fellowship in worshiping the one true God. They had no political clout, no prestige in the community. They were constantly under attack by the people around them. Moreover, false teachers had slithered into the church and like spitting cobras were spraying their venomous lies, deceiving the people and confusing the people. They were despised. They were slandered. They were persecuted. And as we see according to church history, many of them later on were tortured and executed because of their faith in Christ.

Now, you also must recall that Paul and Silas originally founded the church on his second missionary journey according to Acts 17, causing such an uproar among the Jews that they were forced to flee, remember, they had to flee to Corinth and that's where he penned his first letter. And by way of reminder so you understand where he's going with the second letter, in his first letter, he commended them for their work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in Christ. You will remember how he reminded them that they had been sovereignly chosen by God for salvation. He exhorted and encouraged them to stand firm in the faith, even in the midst of great persecution. He refuted the false teachers that had been confusing them in their absence regarding to the rapture of the church, the day of the Lord. And he had confronted those who had decided to stop working because they thought the Lord was coming at any time and so they were mooching off of other people in the congregation. He also instructed them about how they ought to walk and please God by abstaining from sexual immorality; how they needed to love one another; lead a quiet life; attend to their own business; work with their hands. That they needed to be people that lived as day people rather than night people, remember we studied all of that? That they needed to be alert and sober in their walk with Christ. And he admonished them with respect to how they should respond to their church leaders, the leaders that they had put in place. How they should deal with problem members. How they should guard against anything that would quench the Spirit of God in their life. And he reminded them of that magnificent process of sanctification whereby God was conforming them into the likeness of Christ through the power of the Spirit and his word. But now a little bit later, several months later, Paul learns that although the

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church was maturing, some of these same problems persisted. They still had some lazy undisciplined members that still refused to work and wanted others to take care of them. They still had false teachers that were confusing the folks regarding Christ's second coming. And they also learned that persecution was increasing. So while in Corinth with Silas and with Timothy several months after he penned the first letter, he writes this second letter in an effort to confront, to correct and to comfort these dear saints.

So let's look at what he says here in the first five verses.

1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: 2 Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater; 4 therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. 5 This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.

So I would submit to you that here we discover five marks of a praiseworthy church and the first one is really implied in Paul's salutation and that is what I would call obvious regeneration. In other words, it was obvious to their friends and family, to their community, that something supernatural had occurred in their life. They had been radically changed and for this reason Paul says in verse 1, "To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." You see, he's saying here that these believers are viewed as being in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, and as we look at what that means theologically, we understand that it means to be born again. They have been given a new heart, a new mind, a new song, just a new nature. They had become partakers of the divine nature. They were now united to God through faith in his Son validated by the changed lives that they manifested. Remember Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if anyone is in Christ, he is," what? "He is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." And you might also recall in 1 Thessalonians 1, Paul praised them for their reputation, he said, "that had sounded forth," it's like this trumpet that was blaring everywhere, "your reputation has sounded forth even to these distant regions among other churches and here's why: because you turned to God from idols to a serve a living and a true God." You see, friends, when a man is truly regenerated, when he is truly born again, God creates in him a qualitatively new level of excellence. He's a new creation and people can look at that person and say, "Something is different about you." He is given a whole new nature. He now lives for eternity. He no

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longer lives for temporal things. His old value system, his old priorities and passions and beliefs and plans, they've all been changed. He is now in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, unlike most churches today, this church bore little resemblance to the world around them. You might think of it this way: their lives did not conform to the culture, their lives confronted it. You see, these saints were not chameleon Christians that somehow blended into the foliage of a world system that hates God. They were visibly different. They were now a shining light in the world of darkness. Remember Paul says, "I want you to be day people. You're not people of the night." And so these folks could say with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me and the live which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me." Beloved, we must remember that it is our difference from the world, not our similarity with it, that causes people to see that something radical has happened in us; that we have truly been changed by the power of the Gospel. And it is our likeness to Christ, not other men, that draws people to the Savior.

I remember when I was teaching pastors in Kenya, there was a large church from Southern California, quite a prominent church, that had sent a very large group of people, probably 60, maybe even 70 people, on a mission trip and the campus where we were at was one of the places where they stopped and the men that I was teaching, the pastors, they were absolutely appalled at what they saw. The women were dressed so immodestly, even large women dressed immodestly. They were covered with tattoos and body piercings and the men were just shocked and they started asking me, "Do they dress this way in your church? Do they act this way in your church?" because they were loud and I won't get into all of it, but one of the things they wanted to discuss was a best selling book that their pastor had written and they were wondering, "Do you use this book, you pastors?" And the pastors were quick to say, "Oh no, we would never use that book because it distorts the Gospel." And I thought, "Oh boy, here we go." And as we had conversations with these dear people, we could see very quickly that they were just utterly bereft of spiritual discernment. Hopefully they truly knew the Lord. I don't know. I don't want to judge that. But when you look at people like that, regeneration is not all that obvious. That's the point. It's such a dangerous thing.

Well, this church was obviously in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and for this reason Paul went on to summarize the very essence of the Gospel that saved them when he said in verse 2, "Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." What a magnificent statement this is, that God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are the very source of this undeserved grace, this perfect reconciliation with a holy God that you have offended. Grace and peace really summarize just the totality of the

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saving benefits that we enjoy as blood bought saints. So the world around them could clearly look at them and say, "These people are clearly different in the way they think and the way they act, the way they talk. They have a totally different worldview."

Well, the second praiseworthy mark is what I would call increasing faith. Notice verse 3, he says, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged." In the original language it means it's flourishing; it's growing abundantly. You see, this is a cause for great celebration and I might also add that this also affirmed their obvious regeneration. If you say you've been born again and your faith is not growing, there is something wrong. This was really an answer to Paul's prayer and his passion expressed in his first letter. Remember he wanted to help them "complete what is lacking in your faith," and he encouraged them twice to "excel still more." So I think this is such an amazing thing, despite the problems that they faced with doctrinal confusion, with problem members, notwithstanding the increased persecution they were enduring, their faith is greatly enlarged. In other words, their confidence in the Gospel was growing. They were more and more certain that God was up to great things in their lives. But, you know, this is always evidence of genuine saving faith. It not only survives, dear friends, it thrives in the face of adversity. Remember what James said in James 1:2, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." You know, it's amazing, isn't it, to think that God uses persecution and suffering to drive us to him. Not to drive us from him. Even as Paul's thorn in the flesh was used in that way, causing him to say, "I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties for Christ's sake, for when I am weak, then I am strong."

As I meditated upon life in early Thessalonica in this church, my mind began to go to some of the testimonies of martyred saints just prior to their execution and certainly there are many. If you read Fox's Book of Martyrs, you will read many testimonies that describe increasing faith. I'll give you but one example. In the days of Bloody Mary, bloody was her nickname, the queen of England, an avowed Roman Catholic, there was such a hatred towards the Protestants that she wanted them tortured and killed and they used the tax records to determine where the Christians lives, where the Protestants lived and they went then to slaughter them. And one of her rivals was a woman named Lady Jane Grey and she was condemned to death for her refusal to convert to the heresies of Roman Catholicism. Some of you, no doubt, are acquainted with her story. And it was on the 12th day of February, 1554, after seeing her decapitated husband being carried away on a stretcher, she then mounted the scaffold in London to be beheaded with her Bible in her hand and among other things she said this, quote, "I pray you all good Christian people to bear me witness that I die a good Christian woman and that I do look to be

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saved by no other mean but only by the mercy of God and the blood of his holy Son, Jesus Christ. And I confess that when I did not know the word of God, I neglected the same. I loved myself and the world and therefore this plague and punishment is happily and worthily happened unto me for my sins and yet I thank God that out of his goodness he hath thus given me a time and a respite to repent. And now, good people, while I am alive, I pray you assist me with your prayers." It is said that she then recited Psalm 51, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness, according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions," and so forth. It is said then that she took off her gloves and gave her gloves and her handkerchief to her maid. She then forgave her executioner and she blindfolded herself and asked someone to help her find her way to the block upon which she laid her head. And she finally spoke the last words of Jesus as recounted by Luke, "Lord, into thy hands I commend my spirit." Then they took off her head.

Folks, what an example of increasing faith. What an example of the power of regenerating grace, so different from all of the phony superficial stuff that we see in evangelicalism today. Her testimony like thousands of others reminds me of the Psalmist's confidence when he said, "Before I was afflicted, I went astray but now I keep your word." He went on to say, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn your statutes. I know, O Lord, that your judgments are righteous and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me." Oh dear child of God, know this: if your faith is real, you will persevere in it come what may. Moreover, your faith will be greatly enlarged even as those early saints in Thessalonica.

But this church also received God's praise because of their, number 3, growing love, and I must also add that this is another mark of true regenerating grace in a person's life. Notice at the end of verse 3, he is thankful because, "the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater." You see, when persecution comes our way, we will grow in our dependency for God and we will love him more and as we love him more, we automatically love those who he loves, our family of believers. Now remember, this church was made up of a cross section of cultures that formerly hated one another but now they're not fighting each other anymore, they're fighting the enemy of their souls; they're fighting a world system in opposition to God. They are dependent upon one another. They are encouraging one another. They are loving one another.

I reflected upon Calvary Bible Church as I often do, and as I was thinking about this text, I have to say that while I rejoice in the measure of sacrificial love that I see manifested in this church, I am also convinced that it will kind of remain at a plateau until the day comes when we begin to suffer in ways that we never have. Folks, we can't even imagine what it's like to live in a third world country. I've been to several of them. But I can tell

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you, that's the direction we're headed. We can't even imagine what it is to live under a totalitarian regime that hates Christians but that's where we're headed. Dear friends, when we lose our jobs and our children are cold and hungry and friends who were a part of our church family that we were once kind of cold towards and indifferent towards, when those people come along and help us, believe me, our love for them is going to grow in ways that we cannot imagine. When we lose access to our healthcare and our family's are about to be upended, when those that we formerly had no desire to get to know, much less serve, are caring for us and caring for our families, our love for God and our love for them will, as Paul says, grow even greater. When your pastors are imprisoned or killed and you suddenly find yourselves as sheep without a shepherd, you are going to run to the Great Shepherd like you never have before and like sheep will do, you will huddle together for preservation and mutual dependence and your love will grow even greater. And folks, haven't we experienced this before in our lives? People that we formerly didn't really know and suddenly because of the providence of God, things happened and they serve us in some incredible way and our hearts are knit together for eternity? Oh, the bonds of brotherly love that are forged on the battlefields of suffering for Christ in this fallen world. Folks, it is this kind of love that animated God's exuberant, just irrepressible delight that is expressed here by his apostle, that love of which Jesus spoke when he said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another even as I have loved you, that you also love one another, by this all men will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another."

Ah, but the praise continues. Not only on the basis of their obvious regeneration, their increasing faith and growing love, but number 4, because of their steadfast hope. Notice in verse 4, "therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure." I love that word "perseverance." In the original language and even in ours, it means "to hold up under the weight of severe testing; to literally place ourselves under it with contentment, trusting in God to do his great work in his time." And don't you know this would have been an encouragement to those dear people? Do you know what it's like to be mocked and ridiculed? I do a little bit. I haven't experienced anything like they have. I experienced some of it yesterday. I know what it's like for people to roll their eyes and act disgusted. I prayed before a large group at a shooting event on Saturday that I had to go to. I didn't feel like going to it but I'm glad I did. Some of you know about it. And I could tell, you know, you hear some amens but you see the rest of them and you're kind of like the skunk. You know, whenever you walk, everybody kind of clears away. Well, that's not much persecution at all but we know what it's like to have a low view of yourself because everybody thinks you're some kind of a moron because of your faith, and certainly that's what they would have felt like.

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So the Spirit of God comes along through the apostle and encourages them and don't you know this strengthened their resolve. It had to have done so. Don't you know it stimulated their hope. Isn't it great if someone comes up to you and says, "I speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure." What a precious thing. Now, this is quite foreign to us because, as I say, we're not persecuted, nothing like many of the saints are around the world. Few of us experience anything like they experienced in Thessalonica but, dear friend, the storm clouds of persecution are forming. In fact, the current political climate is really a harbinger of hate that I fear is soon going to fall upon us and I would warn you to wake up. Dear friends, America is in decline. Moreover, America is over. The church picnic is over. Think about it: the two most satanic and virulently expansionist ideologies of our current era are Marxism and shariah Islam and the current administration embraces them both. And both will readily acknowledge that their greatest obstacle to not only survive but to expand is biblical Christianity therefore we must not only be silenced, we must be eliminated and so as a result, the far left socialists are using our rejecting of Islam and the LGBT agenda to make us out to be bigots and hate mongers and people that commit hate crimes and are guilty of discrimination. Why? Well, so that we will lose our religious freedoms, our tax benefits, our schools, our children, our seminaries, our Christian colleges, all of those things and eventually our families and even our churches. Vice President Joe Biden has proclaimed that transgender discrimination is the civil rights issue of our time. I mean, it's just absurd. And of course, the Islamists love this attack on our civilization's two core institutions which is really marriage and the family, institutions that are at the heart of the Jude-Christian value system that they despise, so they will happily support the left's assault knowing that that will help them in their quest for world domination. And the left is okay with Islam even though the Islamists are, for example, violently opposed to homosexuality, even though parenthetically most all of the men in those countries are pedophiles that use little boys like little pet animals. But they're perfectly...the left is comfortable with this because they believe in the liberal mantra that basically says the enemy of my enemy is my friend. You hate Christians, so do we, so we are content to let you do your thing.

Now, I might add that all of these things must happen. We shouldn't wring our hands and get all...I'm not trying to terrify, I'm just telling you what's happening and we know that before the Lord comes, before the prekindgom judgments occur, the world has got to be prepared for the antichrist and as we look at the constellation of prophetic signs, we see all of that pointing to that glorious day so we need to be excited but we also need to be sober. We need to be sober-minded. And the question is: when, not if, persecution comes our way, though our faith persevere as theirs did, will we as Paul said in Philippians 2, "Stand firm in one spirit with one mind, striving to gather for the faith of the Gospel, in no way alarmed by your opponents for to you it has been granted." In other words, it's a

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gracious gift, "for Christ's sake. Not only to believe in him but also to suffer for his sake experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear to be in me."

Beloved, I would submit to you that on the basis of Jesus' words when the church in America is under attack, under severe attack, church congregations will diminish dramatically and there is a reason for this: it's because persecution will always destroy phony faith. Jesus made that very clear in his parable of the soils when he warned, "The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy but he has no firm root in himself but is only temporary and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away."

Well, it's obvious that these dear saints did not fall away. They understood what Peter later said to the persecuted saints abroad and, by the way, this is a statement that's even more poignant considering the fact that he had once rejected the Lord three times and then he had repented and he was serving the Lord now faithfully throughout the remainder of his life knowing that at the end he's going to be crucified and he says to them in 1 Peter 1, "In this you greatly rejoice," in other words, your suffering, "even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Oh, what a praiseworthy church this was, one that in our day people would really give no notice to, one that was obviously regenerate, their faith was increasing, love was growing, hope was steadfast so Paul would say, "We are proud of you. We speak proudly of you." But there is one final mark and with this I will close and my voice will gladly let me do so and that final mark is they were confident in their suffering. Notice in verse 5, "This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering." Dear friends, this is so profoundly rich in helping us understand a theology of suffering. What he's saying here is that your persecution and your trials are really proof positive of God's righteous judgment in your life for the purpose of chastening you, for the purpose of purging you from your sin, the purpose of conforming you into the likeness of Christ. This is why a father chastens his son. You see, persecution is what God uses as a refiner's fire to purify us. Suffering for our faith is often what God uses as a powerful and effective means of accomplishing his purposes in our life. It's like the mighty oak. Have we not all grown stronger in the storms of life rather than weaker?

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Online Sermons: http://otcr.org/content/sermon/1373/Marks_of_a_Praiseworthy_Church.html

Marks of a Praiseworthy Church

By David Harrell

Bible Text: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-5
Preached on: Sunday, May 22, 2016

In Acts 14:22, Paul encouraged the persecuted saints when he said, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." And Peter said the same thing in his explanation of the persecutions the believers in Asia Minor were experiencing when he declared in 1 Peter 4, "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" And he went on to declare that they are suffering "according to God's will." To be sure, God's judgment is right, in other words, it is just because in the end he will give to each one what he or she deserves. As a matter of fact, the verses 6 through 10 in 2 Thessalonians 1 goes on to explain that. So here's the point: by his power, we are able to endure and we will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which indeed you are suffering. It's interesting "considered worthy" is the same verb that Jesus used in Luke 20:35 where he spoke of some who were "considered worthy of future resurrection from the dead."

Oh, dear friends, I just want to encourage you never lose this perspective. Whenever your spiritual knees begin to buckle under the weight of persecution, you young people, when you're scoffed at because you believe in creation or whatever it is, whenever you feel that weight know that God is in it. He is using it to refine you. And certainly as a church we never want to compromise. How tragic to see believers lose hope and allow the enemy to cause them to tremble in despair like you will recall, Christian and his friend, Hopeful, in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. Remember, they were seized by Giant Despair and they were thrown into Doubting Castle because of their defective faith and we can all fall into that. The wife of Giant Despair whose name, by the way, was Distrust, begged him to beat them without mercy and so he would come in and he would ridicule and insult them so they would mourn with bitter lamentations because, "God has abandoned us! Woe! What are we going to do?" And finally when their misery was unbearable to the point of suicide, Bunyan tells how they began to pray for discernment. He says that, "We prayed all night." And then he said this, "Then Christian, a short time before daylight, became astounded and passionately exclaimed, 'What a fool I am! Here I lie in a stinking dungeon when I could be walking in complete liberty. I have a key in my pocket called promise that I am sure will open any lock in Doubting Castle.'"

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Oh, child of God, never doubt the promises of God. Live in light of the kingdom that is coming. Never lose sight of his future royal reign and how you will be a part of it. Never doubt his goodness. Never question his plan for your life. Never yield to fear. Even as the preincarnate Christ stood with Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace because they refused to bow down to the king's image, he will stand with you and he will stand with me. And it is my earnest prayer that we will be a church that is worthy of God's praise. I care nothing about the praise of men. There are a thousand gimmicks that would garner the applause of unbelievers but there is no value in the compliment of fools who are at enmity with God. May we like the saints in Thessalonians be known for our obvious regeneration, increasing faith, growing love, steadfast hope and confident suffering, eagerly awaiting the coming of our glorious Savior and King. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Let's pray together.

Father, your word speaks so directly to our hearts and I pray that by the power of your Spirit you will cause it to bear much fruit. For those that do not know you, I pray that the power of the Gospel will so overwhelm them with the conviction of their own sin that they will this day fall before you at the cross and plead for that undeserved mercy and grace that you will grant them so quickly. Lord, we thank you and we give you praise. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We pray you've been edified by this presentation. You have been listening to Pastor, Bible Teacher and Author, Dr. David Harrell. For more information or for other messages from Dr. Harrell, please visit the Olive Tree Christian Resources website at otcr.org.

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