



"Do Hard Things..."

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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-2 Thess 1 -

1 Paul, 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 our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, 4 so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, 5 [which is] manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; 6 since [it is] a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, 7 and to [give] you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, 8 in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, 10 when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed. 11 Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of [this] calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of [His] goodness and the work of faith with power, 12 that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

While the church in Thessalonica was no doubt appreciative and blessed by Paul's first letter, it did little to elevate the struggles and pressures that the people were enduring day to day. This young church was on the receiving end of increasing persecution... oppression that was coming from both the religious realm as well as the secular, which in reality is actually the evidence of a righteous Christ-centered fellowship! They also were being fed misinformation and false doctrine by those with nefarious agendas. Like gaining power and influence...taking the people's money...even the flat-out work of Satan. The believers there in that fellowship began to think that the "end was near." That the second coming of Christ and the end of days was imminent. Even in those days...just like now...there was a widespread premise...a "belief" that following Christ would make their lives easier...more pain-free...more worldly fruitful. However, this is pulled from the imaginations of those who came searching for such a relief ...that "magic elixir" for life...more than they came searching for a Redeemer and a Lord.

The problem invariably originates from our attempts to make Jesus about us, about what we want or don't want. When in reality, following Jesus is about Him. It's about living our lives completely surrendered to Him and living to make His name known. It's about loving and serving others. It's about sharing the best news in the whole world. And when we don't understand this truth we are bound to misrepresent him, become discouraged, move on from the church community that we are called to, and quite like ultimately abandon the faith altogether.

Truth is, sometimes, we are going to have to suffer for our faith. Actually, both Jesus and Paul tell us to expect it.

The apostle Peter wrote in his first letter, chapter 1, verses 6 and 7... *“So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold — though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.”*

For the Thessalonians, the ‘honeymoon’ was over...the Christian warfare that comes to us all had begun for them also. Once again, it is at this point that many leave the faith and leave the church. It's “all good” when it's all good...but when the testing of our faith comes...and it always does, many will fold. Jesus...after many of those that followed Him had headed on back, turned and asked the 12, “are you going to leave me also?”

All of that is not to say that we just need to suck it up and pull ourselves up by the bootstraps. We indeed need to even more so, support, hold up, and encourage one another. Paul knew his encouragement herein was a necessary element of authentic “loving the brethren” by Paul toward the people there.

It is also commonly understood that a letter had come into the church there in Thessalonica that was messing with the heads of the people. Of course, this letter was anonymous. Often, it is what is **not** said that causes the greatest damage. The enemy knows this and thus operates in half-truths, half-stories, conspiracy theories, and innuendos. Many there in Thessalonica believed that this letter was from Paul, which made their confusion all the greater.

The letter claimed that the rapture and the tribulation had already come. Thus, it was obvious that these believers still needed to be instructed. (2Thess 2). They were not “done.” And neither are we!

Paul wrote this 2nd letter to those in Thessalonica, but even more, he wrote to those there that were “in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” That's an important distinction because we will always have those in our physical midst who are in the church but not really in Christ.

Chapter 1

1:1

After greeting his friends, Paul launches into a statement of praise to God for what He had been accomplishing in their lives. Paul was practicing what he had previously “preached” by exercising a heart of “in everything give thanks” (1 Thess. 5:18). You cannot help but notice Paul’s repeated thanksgivings in both of these two letters (1 Thess. 1:2; 2:13, 3:9; 2 Thess. 1:3; 2:13). It is clear that not only does prayer change people and situations, but so does praise.

This was more than just a “hello.” Paul’s letter was not written to some broad and nebulous group of believers. Rather he wrote to the organized ‘church’...the body of believing Christians, the fellowship community that met together in body life and unity in Thessalonica. That’s an important aspect because what is in this letter cannot be accomplished or even realized outside of faith community dynamic. This stuff can never lived out alone or in a “Sunday-go-to-meeting” type of church! They would never understand it, accept it as truth, or live it out as authentic Christianity.

These people were and still are, the “called out ones.” I emphasize this fact, because we can be apt to fail to note that the New Testament was written to *churches* even though there is specific and individual instruction found within those letters. Not to home bible studies, clinical Sunday meetings, or ‘solo fliers,’ but churches as prescribed and designed in the New Testament...those that Jesus said “the gates of hell will not prevail against.”

These were the recipients of these New Testament letters! That should call us to attention...in that we hear what is being taught in these letters and embracing the many characteristics and righteous manifests of the churches that were being written to. They often needed maturing and even correcting, but let us not forget that they still were firmly engaged and “in the game.”

Any attempt to reject the ‘corporate aspects’ of the Bible, or negate and refuse the premise of the centrality of the church in the manifest of the gospel, means you must cut a large swath out of your bible...and circumnavigate around the primary purposes of its total message. I say these things because there will always be those who claim to love God but disdain His people and their churches.

Yet 1 John 3:14-16 says, “If we love our Christian brothers and sisters, it proves that we have passed from death to life. But a person who has no love is still dead. Anyone who hates another brother or sister is really a murderer at heart. And you know that murderers don’t have eternal life within them. We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters.”

Note also the reference not to God “the Father,” but rather to God “*our* Father.” We are wed together in salvation and under the one shed blood of Christ. There is never us and you. There is only “us.” And you are part of us, or you are not, and we prove that, not by what church we attend, but again, by our behavior and whether we love our brethren in deed as much as a word!

1:2

Despite the trials and the difficulties... and even through the fact that such had gotten worse, not better, Paul still desired ‘grace and peace of God’ for them. Grace is not the “get-out-of-jail-free” card that we tend to have made it into in our day, but actually provides the divine power and ability to do God's will, while this “peace” Paul speaks of provides assurance and serenity even in the most terrible circumstances!

Paul understood and taught that there was to exist between us and our God, an intimacy of relationship that was greater than any other and usurped by nothing. Many of us actually hold God and faith at “arm’s length” while “believing,” *in the strictest sense of the word*, within our heads. But our hearts are never humbled and awed in His presence! There is not an attitude of worship in His presence. We fail to fully embrace the reality that the sovereign Creator of the universe is in our midst!

Jesus...when He was teaching the apostles to pray, instructed them to say “Our Father who is in heaven...” What a privilege! Paul, too, was trying to express what an honor that was...the ability to come into the presence of deity! Paul was calling upon these believers...*and upon us too*, to stop and absorb that. God is our *Father*! Not far away and aloof, but up close, personal, and intimate! He is intrinsically and intimately involved in our lives. He’s our dad... and a perfect one at that!

1:3

Despite the problems within the church there...despite the intense persecution and trials they faced, Paul still was calling for hearts of thankfulness in them. This is critically important to the continuity and the success of both our individual Christian standing as well as that of the whole of the church. When we forget or fail to take time to remember and acknowledge where we have come from and what God has done, we begin to complain, strive in our own pursuits, divide the body and isolate ourselves, and ultimately we fall prey to Satan and “crash and burn.”

Paul says, “We must give thanks to God for you, *my brothers! Because we can see both that your faith is growing and you love each other intensely!*” Are *you* thankful today? Or are you preoccupied with what you don’t have and feel on some level that you should? Again, failing in this is a harbinger of a cataclysmic end to your “Christian experiment.” I say “experiment” because your failure to be thankful is evidence that you do not truly understand the cross and what it means. It means you have never really “got it.” You don’t fully grasp what salvation is

and what it means to us and our lives. All you see is the hard stuff and you don't want that aspect of Christianity. And that means you will probably eventually walk away.

For Paul, thankfulness was "right." The language denotes almost a mandatory aspect. For Him, it was an obligation! This is a difficult thing for us in our day, because we are generally so unthankful...so unaware of what we have and what we have been given. It's the inherent nature of our modern world...we are generally selfish and self-absorbed!

Moreover, we live in a very "discontented" world today! That is a natural state without Christ, but shame on us that are guilty of such and actually have God as our Father and have the power of salvation flowing through our veins! Often, our discontent is only evidence that we truly do not know Christ, because we fail to know our blessed state and what we have in our hands! Discontentment inevitable flows from not having what we want to have. We want something different, or we want more of what we already have. When we embrace that premise, we are essentially saying God has failed us. That He is not loving and is not taking care of us, which is a slap in the face of Christ...

Left to fester, we will eventually drift off to 'go looking' for what we think we need or what we powerfully want that God has not given us. This is the hand of Satan. It is one of his most successful methods of knocking us out of the race! It is the heart of 'personal entitlement.' The 'where is mine?' ... 'Why don't I have what he has?' 'How come I'm not getting as much attention? HE didn't have to do this or that, so why should I?'

The problem with this kind of bitterness is that it is a cancer...so it grows and consumes until we are dead...at least spiritually speaking. We must never forget that we deserve nothing. Nothing except death and hell! The only way to combat this is to purposefully and regularly take stock of our lives. And in so, worship God in gratitude and thankfulness.

Real Christian living engages the world around us...a life that reads, watches, listens...goes on mission trips abroad. A life that serves others...shares in the lives of others. I mean, Paul had more right to complain and whine than anyone in this church, and yet he was always abounding in thankfulness and thus worship!

James 1:17 reminds us that "*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights...*" Every morning that our feet hit the floor, should begin with thanks that they did! To fail to acknowledge what God has done and what He has given you is a sin. Let's not try to soft-peddle it! We are obliged to give thanks and a redeemed life needs no arm twisting to do so!

Satan loves to fire up the flesh in this matter and get you all bitter at God and of course your church. And without fail, when we go looking for Satan's promise of more, he rips us off and

we are left with nothing....often loosing what we *did* have, while he stands snickering at us. Because it is then that you will realize that you did this, and you threw away God's awesome blessings. It could be your spouse, your family, your church, your friends, your money, or whatever. Satan is the "prince of thieves!"

Perhaps you are not in a position to see the 'follow-up' of such a performance on the part of others. But I am... in fact, I regularly see it. And it breaks my heart to know what they had, and what they have thrown away due to bitterness and an insatiable flesh.

Let me ask you today: Do you truly trust in God? Do you trust Him to take care of you and involve Himself intimately in your life? Or do you live in an overall dull constant state of fear. Are you constantly looking for a safe place? If so, you apparently don't know the kingdom of God or the all powerful king who rules over it.

He has made a lot of promises concerning you. Do you believe them? Are you willing to stake your life on them? Because that is faith. That is Christianity.

According to Acts, Paul was shown all the things he would have to suffer and experience for following Jesus, and yet he stepped out undeterred. How did he do that? Perhaps because he understood what he really deserved, and what he instead received in the form of blessing on this earth and the eternity that awaited him at the end of the road. Its in the zone...out on the spiritual highwire without a net...that the Christian life is lived and experienced!

1:4

Despite an imperfect track record, Paul was enormously pleased in the progress and the stout-heartedness in the believers in Thessalonica. They remained thankful and enduring despite trials...despite persecutions...despite their fallen flesh. God had been faithful, thus so had they. They had not forgotten. They had not abandoned ship!

Concerning patience, James says "*So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.*" There will be times in our lives... "crossings" if you will, that will come and test us in these matters. Your survival is critical to moving ahead and knowing all that God has planned for you! The believers in the early church endured a lot of hard things and they more than survived them, they thrived because they survived them.

When you stand at that crossroad you will be mightily tempted, and many will not make it. Those that do...those that have, are today more thankful and gracious than ever, because they understand. They get it. They know the magnitude of what salvation means and how much they are loved by God. They worship God like never before. Like Paul after his eyes were opened in Acts, they are thereafter even more undeterred by tribulation and trial. They are not consumed

by what they do not have, but rather incredibly thankful for what they do have. And most of all, they endure! Not just survive, but thrive. They will not be moved...

How do we make sure we are part of that number? Firstly, we must decide before the testing where we stand! If we wait until the storms come, chances are good we will not make it through. No one digs a basement as the tornado or the flood is approaching their house! Secondly, we must faithfully take the time to acknowledge God, his blessings, and to be thankful. And lastly, all of this comes through a life of “unceasing prayer”...a life of daily worship.

Just how caught up are you today with the things of this life? Satan wants to keep you hurried, confused, and distracted. He does not want you to take the time to “smell the roses” and certainly not to actually stand in wonder and awe over their beauty and creation!

Christian...we must stop and realize what you have been given! Look around you! You are loved and cared for by a perfect Father and redeemed by a loving Savior. You have been given the “keys to life!” Embrace it and endure...

1:5

Paul was saying that the very fact that the believers had been persecuted and gone through trials was the very thing that proved they were part of God's kingdom!

2 Timothy 3:12 reminds us that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."

We tend to think that trials and difficulties mean something is wrong...that we are enduring spiritual warfare or have sinned or something.

Paul is going to lay out the scenario for them and for us:

- 1) Trials are going to come, but they don't have to only a negative
- 2) God will deal with those who persecute you for your faith
- 3) he will return to take us to a realm where there will no longer be such tribulations that stem from our fallen world and fallen natures.

In reality, it is those uncomfortable and often difficult things that produce Christ like qualities in me.

There is really no other way. If you want to be like Jesus, hard times are inevitable. Seeking to avoid such at all cost is therefore essentially avoiding God's work of love within us and within our lives.

We can continue to live at any cost avoiding the challenges, the testing, the stretching of our faith. But doing so is to remain a spiritual child at best, and at worst, falling away from God in our idolatry of comfort and ease over holiness and pleasing God.

When we look at a diamond, it appears quite beautiful.

But let's not forget that to get there, it had to start as a worthless lump of coal, and then get squeezed hard for a very long time, and then finally get carefully and surgically 'cut.'

That's why Peter tells us our faith is purified by fiery trials (1 Peter 4:12), and James says, "Count it all joy when you go through those trials" (James 1:2).

So will we...do we...pray "God get me out of here!" or "God, your will be done when it comes to me...do what is best to make me like you?"

Romans 8:17-18 "And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering. Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later."

How the believers dealt with their trials and tribulations was reflective of who they were in Christ.

There was no evidence of their becoming hysterical. We see no bitterness, no anger, no retaliation.

Paul was proud of them! Back in verse 4 he says he boasted of them to others!

On the flip side, we also don't see any signs that they were accepting the persecution like passive sheep either! They in fact kept loving the way they had always done. (vs. 3)
They exercised a "righteous judgment" in their situation, just as we are called to do in ours!

In doing so, they were "counted worthy of being part of the kingdom of God."
That doesn't mean they had 'earned their place', because none of us can.
But it means rather that they had proved that they were in their place!
They manifested Christlikeness. They bore evidence that they were one of His.

And the fact is, our behavior speaks of that relationship every day.
Our lives say we are His, or they reflect that we either are not, or are in deep rebellion and sin.

1:6

The believers trusted God.

They understood as we must that "vengeance belonged to God" not to them.
Romans 12:19 Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

Do you trust God in this?

How often we feel the necessity to "intervene" and try to fix things that are God's to fix?
2 Peter 2:6-9 "God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and turned them into heaps of ashes. He made them an example of what will happen to ungodly people. But God also rescued Lot out of Sodom because he was a righteous man who was sick of the shameful immorality of the wicked people around him. Yes, Lot was a righteous man who was tormented in his soul by the wickedness he saw and heard day after day. So you see, the Lord knows how to rescue godly people from their trials, even while keeping the wicked under punishment until the day of final judgment."

The fact is, we live in the midst of an evil and an unjust world.

Therefore, much of the world's behavior—much of man's behavior—is evil and unjust.
It will be that way...if fact it will only get worse, until the Lord returns to end all of this.

This verse says it is a "righteous thing" for God to punish.

Such an idea causes much anger and angst in a lot of people.

They want to see the situation from the side of the entrenched rebel...saying "if God is really a God of love, then how can he punish? How can he send people to hell?"

God has provided a clear escape for sinful man.

We have to but take the offer and be set free from the guilt and the punishment, but the vast majority will never take up His offer.

The current standing of mankind was our doing! Our state of being was started in the garden with Adam and Eve, but we finished it all by ourselves!

Hell was never meant for humans. But we have made our choice, and with said choice comes 'baggage.'

Either I will spend eternity with God...a place of 'no more tears and no more crying,' or I receive the 'bill' for a life of living as I please.

A person has to work hard to get to hell.

He has to reject every attempt by God to reach him, to love him, to forgive him. It's been said that God doesn't send anyone to hell, he merely confirms reservations.

The choice is OURS. We make it, and He delivers upon our decision!

1:7-9

No matter the depth and the length of our trials, they will come to an end.

If not in this life, they will when Christ returns. At that time, all we have done...good or bad...will be 'squared up.'

Not one "cup of cold water" given to one of the saints of God will have gone unnoticed and not one evil will be 'swept under the rug.' All will be made evident. All will be laid bare.

His return is to essentially restore everything to the way that it is supposed to be. He will give true believers rest, and punish those who reject His gospel, and judge the 'pretenders' that abuse it and look upon it as inconsequential and insignificant.

Job 3:17— "There the wicked cease from troubling, And there the weary are at rest."

Scripture tells us that eternity contains two judgments:

One for those that rejected the gospel, thus rejecting His grace. For these, they will appear at the "Great White Throne Judgment."

This is a judicial branch that confirms your rejection of Christ and the cross. There are no varying degrees of sentence here...just guilty and hell.

Leon Morris wrote "If there is any truth in Scripture at all, this is true—that those who stubbornly refuse to submit to the gospel, and to love and obey Jesus Christ, incur at the Last Advent an infinite and irreparable loss. They pass into a night on which no morning [ever] dawns"

The second is the "Bema Seat of Judgement." (Romans 14:10 and 1 Corinthians 5:9)

Hughes wrote the following: "If our deepest longing is for that consummating moment when we shall at last be transfigured into His image, then it should be our present concern to progress daily, by the grace of God, towards the goal of Christlikeness. Love for the Master because of His matchless love for us should be sufficient incentive for us to follow devotedly in His steps. But there is a further consideration, to which the Apostle draws attention here, namely, that even for the Christian there is to be a day of reckoning."

Here all believers will appear to be judged as to the life we have led...whether we invested our spiritual gifts that were given to us...whether we served God and kingdom...whether He was our

Lord or just a distant Savior. Again Hughes continues about this issue: “appear” means “to be revealed, to be made manifest, to show openly.” “We will be revealed as we are, a revelation of what had previously been hidden. The secret thing of our heart and life will be made manifest to all. We must all stand revealed in our true character before the judgment seat of Christ. This means not just to appear but to be laid bare, stripped of every outward façade of respectability, and openly revealed in the full and true reality of one’s character. All our hypocrisies and concealments, all our secret, intimate sins of thought and deed, will be open to the scrutiny of Christ — a clear indication, incidentally, of the absolute Deity of the Redeemer, for it is only the divine gaze which penetrates to the very essence of our personality: ‘man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart’ (1 Sam 16:7).”

These facts are important for all of us. For the unredeemed sinner as well as the saved believer. We all must know: there will be a day in which we all will answer for our lives. There will be no dodging this. You cannot send an email and then just walk away.

1:10

Note that the passage says that Christ will come to be glorified in His saints.

At that point we must believe that such will occur by our finishing well.

We lived for Him in our lives and we “fought a good fight, ...finished our course, ...we kept the faith.” (2Ti 4:7)

When we appear before the Bema seat...when he returns for us and all our trials are finished as well as all of our work and service, there will be those whose revealed lives “glorify” God.

It will not be those who shined that are admired and applauded, but rather Christ himself.

Because through all the good stuff we did or our failures, it will be quite evident at that time that we can claim no credit for any good deed. It was and is all Jesus.

All we ever did was let Him work through us. All we ever did was trust Him and His Word.

1:11-12

Will God count you worthy of His calling?

If He did indeed choose you, does your living reflect that?

Paul’s desire for the church in Thessalonica, as well as mine for you, is that you “fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness. That you live out His work of faith and power.

Is the name of Jesus Christ glorified in you?

Do you understand what that means? Does your very living speak of His manifest power?

When people come to know you, do they stand in awe of the God that is living in you? Even in the trials and the persecutions?

Unless your house is built upon the Rock...you will not allow the fulfillment of this prayer in your life.

We are called to “fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness.” What a statement! That’s T-shirt stuff for sure!

Despite the war we endure on this planet...our own trip-ups and shortcomings, He wants us to experience and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness.

Do you? Are you? This is God’s desire for you as well as Paul’s and mine!

When we do, such overwhelms us with thanks. We get it. We understand.

And when we know His good pleasure...when we know His goodness...when we live out not just works but a work of faith and mysterious power manifested through us, the name of Jesus will be glorified in us.

All because of Him. All because of His boundless grace...