

WEDNESDAY

Bible Study

The Marks Of A Model Church

'Growing Pains' - 1 Thessalonians 2:1-10

2 October 2024 - Revd Paul A. Carr

Introduction

Who can remember that old Neil Sedaka song: *Breaking up is hard to do*? He may as well have sung: *Growing up is hard to do*! After commending the Thessalonians in ch1, for being the 'Perfect Church' in ch2, we get a sense of Paul's deep concern for the spiritual development of the Thessalonians with the recognition that growing up would be painful. Who of us, in our human/spiritual lives have not suffered from growing pains? I want to suggest five pains from ch2!

1) The pains of being a Faithful Steward vs 1-6

Paul, vs4, had been: *entrusted with the Gospel*. It wasn't a message he made up or received from men (Galatians 1:11-12) but from God. He looked on himself as a steward of God's message. One of the most important qualities a steward possesses is faithfulness (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). Being effective in our Christian life requires much more than simply knowing the basic facts about Jesus. It requires us being faithful to God's word in all that He teaches us through it. This may have made Paul unpopular in the eyes of men - we know Paul's preaching had provoked much opposition 1-2; he, and Silas had been beaten at Philippi, yet continued to preach the Gospel - but he dared not be unfaithful in the eyes of God, vs4: *We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts*.

Paul assures them, vs3: *... the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives*. Paul confirms that Jesus' death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:16) is a true message and is the only true Gospel (Galatians 1:6-12). Some people in Paul's day used religion as a way to make money. Paul didn't use the Gospel, vs5: *as a mask to cover up greed* ... He was open and honest in all his dealings. He didn't want to give anyone a reason to accuse him of being a religious salesman (1 Corinthians 9:1-18). However, you know as well as I do, that it's possible to preach the right message with the wrong motives - I'm sure we've all encountered so called TV Evangelists on American TV. I believe we must have integrity in the way we proclaim, and minister, the Gospel. Some Christians try to win friends and influence people by pandering to individual egos rather than trusting in God's word.

2) The pains of feeding on God's Word vs 7-12

Paul recognises that the Thessalonians are young in faith, and he uses the analogy of babies to make his point. Vs7, reads: *a nursing mother cherishing her own children*. Now this may seem unusual that a man should use feminine symbolism but I think it outlines something of Paul's heart in dealing with the infant church. And we can all learn from the gentle, loving, self-sacrificing approach of a mother in our pastoral care. This is what Paul is saying in vs8: *We loved you so much ... we shared our lives with you*. Paul had a patient love as he nourished their faith.

There's no doubt that it takes a great deal of patience to care for new babies. Sleepless nights. Children who insist on sleeping in your bed. Food fights. Bath fights. I don't want to go to school. We've all been there at some point in our lives.

How would we define a baby Christian? As someone who: is not willing to live a holy life; is not prepared to wrestle with, and apply, the teaching of the Bible to their lives. In 1st and 2nd Corinthians we read that the believers in Corinth engaged in a lot of ungodly behaviour because of their immaturity: arguing; quarrelling; cheating; lawsuits; adultery and drunkenness. Paul wrote to them in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3: *Brothers, I could not address you as to spiritual but as worldly – mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it.* In 1 Peter 2:1-3: Peter encouraged new believers to be: *Like newborn babies, craving pure spiritual milk, so that ... you may grow up in your salvation ...*

After using the example of a mother, Paul writes, vs11-12: *For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with each of his own children, encouraging, comforting, urging.* Paul's desire, vs12, was that his children might: *Live lives worthy of God.* Not bad 'fatherly' motivation! Just as a father wants to be proud of his children, so the Lord wants to receive glory through the lives of His children. Maturity doesn't just happen overnight. All children experience growing pains and encounter problems as they mature.

Are you wanting/ready to grow in your faith? If you are, then you have to make the effort. Have you read your Bible since last Sunday? A recent survey by the Scripture Union suggests that something like 68% of regular churchgoers never read the Bible from one Sunday to the next. A hunger for God's word will shape our relationship with the Lord. Just as a baby initially feeds on milk, then moves to soft food and eventually onto solids. So must we move on and develop in our faith. There is a need to move onto the meatier aspects of God's word and, we must remember, that nothing substitutes for a knowledge of God's Word. That's the only way we begin to grow up. The only way we come to know God is through personal, factual and practical knowledge of His plans and purposes. There's no doubt that what's required of Christians is demanding, so it's good that vs12 reminds us that it is *'God who calls you into his kingdom and glory'*. In all our serving, leading, teaching and helping it is God that we're dependent on, and it is him who gives us confidence and hope.

3) The pains of growing in God's Word vs 13

We can't deny that growing up isn't a painful experience – because it can be, and is. If a child doesn't want to hear what we have to say, does it mean that we stop saying what we know is the truth and good for their well-being? We tell them to keep off the cooker or fireplace because it may harm them. If they whinge and moan, we don't say: OK, do what you like. We keep telling them the truth, until they accept what we have to say, because we know it is good for them and it is the right thing to do.

So it is with Paul. He wants the Thessalonians to understand the importance of God's word and he continues to teach the same truths until it sinks in, and they begin to grow in faith. The message of the Bible is eternal and life changing. It is always relevant and always speaks to the issues of our time. I like the way Eugene Peterson puts 2 Timothy 3:16 in *The Message*: *Every part of scripture is God breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.*

It's one thing to receive God's Word and quite another to accept it, but this is what the Thessalonians did. But it's in applying God's word where we begin to struggle isn't it? It can be very uncomfortable, because it is a challenge to us. Hebrews 4:12: *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

It can be very painful growing up! We are commanded to be holy as God is holy and to live in the light and to be a people who are distinctively different because we are followers of Jesus. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:3-4, we are to keep away from: *sexual immorality ... impurity ... greed ... obscenity ... foolish talk ... coarse joking* Vs5 goes on to point out that: *such a man is an idolater and has no place in the kingdom of God.*

God isn't a killjoy. He knows these things cause us harm and bring harm to others. But His heart's desire is for each of us to reach our fullness and our potential in him, Ephesians 3:19. I wonder what is it that separates you from God and makes you feel that God is at a distance? Continuing in them may well account for why your Christian life may be challenging and ineffective. Of course, we can't overcome these things in our own strength and will often fall flat on our face, however, with God's strength: *We can do all things through him who strengthens us*, Philippians 4:12.

The Thessalonians allowed God's Word to change their lives. The same Word that brings us salvation also enables us to live for Jesus and endure suffering for His sake. It enabled them to stand strong in the midst of persecution and kept them from wandering off in the wrong direction. Each of us have a responsibility to grow up spiritually and to respond to those parts of the Bible which are a bit more difficult to understand and to those teachings we would, perhaps, choose to ignore.

4) The pains of growing in God's World vs 14-16

Paul highlights two types of suffering here. Suffering that comes as a consequence of obeying God and suffering as a consequence of rejecting God. Each of us endure suffering simply because we are Christians. It can be difficult being a Christian in today's world where Biblical morals, ethics and attitudes are laughed at and ignored. We can so easily find ourselves isolated and alienated because we follow Jesus. If we are living in the way God is calling us to, we will suffer for His sake (2 Timothy 3:12). Jesus, of course, promised that this would happen (John 15:18-27).

Perhaps your family has disowned you because of your faith? Perhaps you've experienced all sorts of conflict in your personal and working lives because you refuse to compromise your faith? Perhaps you've had to walk away from a friendship that was causing you so much pain and conflict and dragging you down in your faith because you felt you had no alternative? These experiences hurt - there's no doubt about that - but they are not ours alone. We are not the only ones going through the furnace. We may not experience the same kind of political/religious persecution that the early Christians suffered - though in some parts of the world today it is just as intense as it was then.

Paul assured the Thessalonians that their experiences weren't new or isolated. Others had suffered before them and were even then suffering with them. Sometimes we think that we are the only ones suffering and we can become quite 'self-absorbed.' Every generation, every century, has seen this happen because people will always reject, and be angered by, Jesus' claim to be: *the way, the truth and the life*, (John 14:6).

In 2 Corinthians 6:5-10, Paul wrote about what he endured for the Gospel's sake: *great endurance; troubles, hardships and distresses; beatings, imprisonments and riots; hard work, sleepless nights and hunger ... glory and dishonour; bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

The early church was not destroyed by suffering, if anything, it made them stronger and their faith, and numbers, increased. One of the great features of the local church is that we stand together in times of difficulty and encourage one another. It was when Elijah isolated himself from the other faithful Israelites in 1 Kings 19 that he became discouraged and wanted to die. A lonely saint is very vulnerable to attack from the enemy. Learning from, and encouraging, each other is what being a Christian community is all about.

5) The pains of growing in God's Glory vs 17-20

Paul's desire, vs12, is for them to: *Live lives worthy of God* and so must we (Colossians 1:10; Philippians 1:27). The verb used in vs12 is in the present tense, that is: we are continually being called to a life of holiness and obedience. We are to walk worthy of the calling we have in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 4:1). But Paul didn't look back, he looked ahead and rejoiced.

Because, for the Christian, we believe the best is yet to come. Paul looked ahead by faith and saw his friends in the presence of Jesus in glory, vs19. In times of trouble and testing, that's the promise we have. Paul's actions were governed by what God would do in the future. He knows that Jesus will return and reward him for his faithful ministry and on that day, the saints from Thessalonica would bring glory to God and joy to Paul's heart.

Conclusion

If we want to be effective in our Christian lives and be good witnesses/role models to the world around us, we need to grow up. The strength, and weakness, of any church is not Jesus, but the people in it. It's true, isn't it? The Gospel is only as effective as our lifestyle and integrity as Christians. Growing up as a Christian is not without its pains. It can be painful as we seek to be faithful stewards of all that God has given to us. It can be painful as we feed on His word and mature in our faith. It can be painful as we grow into God's word; as we wrestle with the standards that God sets for us compared with what we are, or not as the case maybe, prepared to do. It can be painful being a Christian in today's world where Biblical morals, ethics and attitudes are laughed at and ignored. Where we can so easily find ourselves isolated and alienated because we follow Jesus. It can also be painful growing in God's glory as he fashions and shapes us to be a holy people, yet we have the promise of a crown of glory as the reward for our faithfulness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1: What, do you think, are the implications of pleasing men before God, both in your own life and in church life?

2: What are the barriers that stop you maturing as a Christian? What, if any, are the issues you need to address?

3: What difficulties did the Thessalonians face in sharing their faith with others, vs14-16? Give some examples of how sharing your faith has been a positive and a negative experience.

4: Have you found growing up as a Christian to be a painful experience? In what ways might this be true? How does this compare with Paul's sufferings in 2 Corinthians 6:5-10?