

Rejoice in progress

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[0 : 00] Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all the stress of this situation, we would encourage you to be able to suffer from suffering. But now that you really believe, since you are standing from the middle, how can I thank God in the day, in terms of all the joy you have, that this is our God, for suffering?

Tonight, we will be able to see you again, and apply to this happy evening. God of others, and self-centered, and of both ages, hear the way of God's counsel.

May the Lord, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord, and the Lord, and the Lord, and the Lord, and the Lord, just as others do so. May He shenten us so that He will be famous and holy to the eternal power of God in the world.

May the Lord, the Lord, and the Lord, and the Lord, just as others do so. This is the Lord, of all. Good morning, and it's a great joy to be seeing so many of you, and a great joy also to be able to bring God's Word to you again from 1 Thessalonians.

So to make sure that that's in front of you, there's a sermon outline on the Order of Service, if that helps. And let's pray one more time to God. Father, we praise you again that we can just come together in this way, to just receive from you, to have you feed us.

[1 : 29] And so, Heavenly Father, we just come to you now as a sheep comes to their shepherd, that you might indeed look after us, protect us from wolves, help us to keep progressing, and to keep following you all the way home.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, let me ask a question that you might not have thought about very much. How do we feel about one another?

How do we view each other here at KEC? Now, if we were to give a very honest answer, for some of us at least, we might have to admit, we don't feel anything much at all.

In fact, we hardly even think of one another at all. Before the pandemic struck, we might have come regularly to our Sunday service every week for 90 minutes. But once that's over, we exit quickly.

And once we exit, it's out of sight, out of mind. We wouldn't even be able to recognize the faces of those we attend the service with if we were to meet them outside of church premises.

[2 : 40] Now, thankfully, I'm sure that's not true of all of us, of many of us. But of course, nearly two years into a pandemic, many of us have not seen each other that much.

Just last week, I mentioned to one of you that I met in person that it was the first time since September 2020 that we've seen each other. And the longer we are away from one another, the more it's a case of out of sight, out of mind.

Sure, we do attend every Sunday online, but the experience is a bit like the title of a book written by that professor of communications I mentioned a few weeks ago, Sherry Turkle.

We are alone together. That's the title of her book. And that, in many ways, summarizes our current experience. We are alone together, loosely connected by technology, but in reality disconnected from one another.

And that's why today's word from one Thessalonians is incredibly important at this time. Now, I just want you to imagine for a second that you're a Thessalonian believer, and you're hearing this letter read out for the first time.

[3 : 54] And as you got to this section that was just read out to us by Brian Lassong, you would have heard this kind of language from Paul. Out of our intense longing, we made every effort to see you.

We wanted to come, again and again. Now, upon hearing that, how would you feel? You would feel, I believe, deeply loved, deeply valued, deeply cherished.

You see, Paul knows that we are not designed simply to be alone together. We are not designed to be anonymous together or independent together. This week, I was reading Psalm 68, and I came across a verse that I had never noticed before.

In verse 6, the psalmist tells us that God sets the lonely in families. And that jumped out at me. God sets the lonely in families.

A place where we're not just alone, but truly belong. Where we are viewed not just as a sea of blank faces, but as deeply loved and cherished.

[5 : 08] It's what we all long for, and it's what God wants church to be. To be knitted together, bound together, intertwined together, intimate together.

And so the question is, how can church begin to be this kind of place? How can we begin to feel this way about each other? Well, obviously, it has to be a supernatural work of God.

We need God at work in us. And so that means we need God's word at work in us. And so that means we need to embrace God's word as we heard last week.

And so, let's get into the word now. Do open your Bibles again if you've closed it. And see for ourselves, how can church be this kind of place? What habits can help us exemplify this depth of feeling for one another?

And we will notice four habits in particular. Firstly, have a deep concern for one another. Have a deep concern for one another.

[6 : 16] Let's recall the historical context. From Acts 17, we discovered that Paul had come to Thessalonica to share the gospel. As he did so, God began to work, and people began turning to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith.

But that brought great opposition. And though he had only been there for a short time, Paul had to leave abruptly. Meanwhile, his opponents orchestrated a whispering campaign, casting doubt on Paul's authenticity.

Was Paul just another in a long line of religious salesmen? Was it the case that as soon as he left Thessalonica, it was out of sight, out of mind?

Did he care about the believers he had preached to? After all, if he did, he would never have left. Or he would have come and visited you. That was what was being whispered.

And so, Paul now writes in part to reassure them. He wants to share his heart with them. If earlier in chapter 2, he wrote to defend his ministry while he was with them.

[7 : 25] Now he writes to defend his absence from them. You see, how does he feel about being separated from them? Look at verse 17.

But brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time, in person, not in thought, out of our intense longing, we made every effort to see you.

Notice the language used. Being separated from you guys, Paul says, is like losing my parents. It's like a bereavement.

Paul had described himself earlier like a mother and a father. But now, instead of nursing them and being involved in their lives, he has become an orphan.

Cut off from them. And though he sees this separation as temporary, it's only for a short time, notice. And in a sense, it's not a complete separation.

[8 : 24] He was distant from them in person, but not in thought, or more literally, not in heart. Nevertheless, that was enough to cause him deep anguish.

It aroused in him a deep longing for a reunion. It's slightly hidden in the NIV translation, but the end of verse 17 more literally says, as on the screen in the ESV, we endeavoured the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face.

In other words, Paul would not have been satisfied with meeting others over WhatsApp and YouTube. Now, those tools have their uses. After all, since he can't be with the Thessalonians right now, Paul makes full use of the technological tools available to him.

He takes ink and papyrus and writes a letter to them. And yet he longed to be personally present with them.

Nothing beats being there in person. And so that's how Paul's deep concern expressed itself.

Though his separation from them is enforced, to use today's language, he is socially distanced from them.

[9 : 39] It's never a case of out of sight, out of mind for him. And if you think about it, that's how it always has been in Paul's ministry, hasn't it?

Paul spent quite a bit of time socially distanced from others. Now, most of it was imposed by others, as he was imprisoned in places like Philippi and Rome.

And yet, from a jail in Philippi, he can write to the Philippian believers to thank them for their partnership in the Gospel, and even try to resolve some conflicts arising from within their fellowship. From a prison in Rome, he encourages his protegee, Timothy, to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and to guard the good deposit of the Gospel, even in the face of false teaching. Even when he was away from other believers, Paul never stopped showing a deep concern for them. He never considered his separation as a reason to stop communicating and encouraging and ministering to other believers.

[10 : 54] If he lived during a pandemic under lockdown conditions, he would still do exactly the same thing. But what were his actual concerns?

What was Paul concerned about for the Thessalonians? Well, look at 3 verse 3, and we can see that he was worried they would be unsettled by trials.

As they came under all sorts of intense pressure and difficult circumstances, Paul was worried that they would be undone by all the stress and all the sorrow they were facing.

And he isn't just concerned about their physical well-being. More significantly, he's worried they won't last the distance as Christians.

In verse 5, he was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you, and that our labours might have been in vain. Now, it could be that these temptations were sexual because Paul mentions sexual immorality in the very next chapter.

[11 : 59] But more likely, he is still referring to the opposition they are facing. Satan could have used the severity of suffering to tempt the believers to give up.

Or alternatively, he could have used the allurements of apostasy. Quite likely, the pagan authorities in Thessalonica were busy trying to get them to give up the faith.

If only they would acknowledge that Caesar is Lord, not Jesus. And if they did, then Paul's gospel ministry would have been all in vain.

The Thessalonians would no longer be serving the true and living God. And that's what kept Paul up at night. You see, what was it that ultimately drove Paul's concern above all else?

The answer is their eternal destiny. Look at 2 verse 19. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes?

[13 : 06] Is it not you? All throughout this letter, Paul has been aware that the Lord Jesus is coming again. If you were to look at the end of chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5, just like here at the end of chapter 2, you will consistently find a reference to the return of the Lord Jesus.

And so Paul's biggest concern is, will the Thessalonians be ready to meet him when he comes? Do they know they are his crowning glory?

After all, as the preacher F.B. Meyer eloquently puts it, the souls whom he had won for Jesus were to constitute his crown. It was as though they would be woven into a wreath like that, given to the ancient athlete when he finishes his race.

And so what Paul longs most of all is for him to get to the finishing line, walk through heaven's gates, and see a crowd of Thessalonians waiting for him there. That is his hope. That is what will bring him joy.

An old schoolmate posted on Facebook this week how he and his wife got a big shock because their primary school age children won a school award and didn't even tell them.

[14 : 31] It was his son actually. And it was only when they attended the awards evening that they discovered this. But you can bet that their hearts were bursting with the right kind of pride.

And that's what Paul longs for. To be there when God hands out the prizes and discover that the Thessalonians are in line to receive them.

It's what drove his concern for them. And I just want to say this morning, that's the kind of longing that drives my concern for all of you.

And my deep concern for each and every one of you is that you will be ready to meet the Lord Jesus when he comes. I want you to know that behind every pastoral letter and devotional that I've written over the course of this pandemic, behind every webinar that I've tried to arrange, behind the phone calls and messages that I've exchanged with some of you, I do so because I want us to be prepared to meet him with great joy.

During this time perhaps sometimes you felt the absence of a shepherd. And if so, I apologize for my shortcomings. But like Paul, I just want you to know, I long to see BEM KEC at Heaven's Award ceremonies.

[16:03] And like Paul, I'm concerned that you might be unsettled and shaken. Perhaps not so much by opposition, but by this once-in-a-lifetime event.

I'm concerned that the tempter might lead you to apathy and indifference. That you might fail to make Jesus of us importance. And that we raise this opportunity in these times to let God do something powerful in our lives.

And let God use us to make a difference in someone else's life. And so I long for this to be our main concern for one another.

That we're concerned for each other's readiness to meet Jesus. You see, what is one of the most basic features of being a Christian?

Quite simple. That we love other Christians. That we are marked by a deep concern for them. And that means being marked by a deep concern for each other's spiritual state.

[17:10] Have a scan through 1 Thessalonians 3 verse 1 to 10. And I want you to notice that a particular phrase keeps popping up. Have you spotted it?

It's that phrase, your faith, which appears at least five times. And that is exactly what Paul is concerned about.

In our culture, we are encouraged to think of my faith as my business and my business alone. No other person is allowed to inquire about it. Not even the pastor.

But that is not the perspective of the Bible. Look again at places like 3 verse 5 and 6 and verse 10. And you can see that Paul makes the Thessalonians' faith his business.

In 3 verse 5, we can see that it preoccupies him. Not because he's a busy body looking for opportunity to gossip. Not because he wants to play the comparison game.

[18:15] Oh, look, I'm better than you. But because he truly is deeply concerned for them. He wants them to know that he is being like the chief shepherd.

Jesus himself. Seeking after potentially wandering sheep. Protecting them from wolves. Leading them by steel waters.

And though we are not all shepherds, we can all still play a part. Because the body needs each part. I wonder if you've been struck by the familial language that Paul has been using all throughout chapter 2.

His talk in terms of fathers and mothers. Brothers and sisters. Infants and orphans. And just because Paul is the spiritual parent to these Thessalonians.

Doesn't mean that as brothers and sisters, they don't need to care about each other. As verse 12 makes clear. There you see that he wants their love to increase and overflow for one another.

[19:23] And so just because the pastor especially should be deeply concerned for those under his care. Doesn't mean that the rest don't have to. Rather, if we are brothers and sisters in Christ, we are deeply concerned for one another.

We care whether or not you are sticking with Jesus or you are drifting from him. And that means taking action.

And that brings us to our second habit. Secondly, be willing to take action. Be willing to take action. In verse 17, Paul makes every effort to see them.

His concern drove him to action. Family meets together. The problem, of course, was verse 18. For we wanted to come to you. Certainly I, Paul, did again and again.

But Satan blocked our way. Now, Paul doesn't give us any more detail than that. But it's safe to say in context that he probably was hindered through the efforts of the same people who drove him out in the first place.

[20:32] Those people were serving Satan's agenda. There was a great spiritual battle going on. They were trying to prevent people, Christians, brothers and sisters, from meeting one another.

But Paul did not give up. His deep concern for them would not allow it. And so as Paul ponders his options, he decides that he will be willing to spare nothing but the best to find out what was going on in their midst.

Even if that comes at a cost to him. 3 verse 1. So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens, where he was at that moment.

And we sent Timothy. You see, Athens had been tough ground for the Gospel. If you read Acts 17, that would be pretty clear.

But that doesn't stop Paul from sending some lowly messenger. But Timothy himself, one of his closest brothers, his close co-worker.

[21 : 40] If he can't go himself, he will send the next best person. And you see, when we love one another, when we have a deep concern for one another, that's what we'll do.

We'll pursue one another in love, even if it costs us. Love isn't just a nice, warm, fuzzy feeling. Rather, love seeks the welfare of each other. I really appreciated it when one of our elders popped by the office a few weeks ago to see me.

It was a brief meeting. But one of the things he asked me after our business was done was, How can I pray for you? And then he made sure to pray for me there and then.

He showed concern. And he took action. Simple, but profound. To use the language of verse 5, he set out to find out about my faith.

[22 : 39] And then verse 2, he wanted to strengthen and encourage me in the faith. And so I want to encourage all of us to be willing to ask each other from time to time, how we're really honestly going on in our walk with the Lord.

Don't be afraid to ask, how's your Bible reading going? How's prayer going for you? How is your heart with God? How are you doing in this area or that area?

And who knows, God might be pleased to use you to spur someone on. But that can only happen when we are willing to actually ask.

And give permission to others to share their heart with you. I recently asked someone in our congregation how they're going. And after he told me how he was doing, then he asked me back as well.

And for a few seconds, I thought I'll just say, okay, I'm alright, thanks. You know, after all, I'm the pastor, right? I'm supposed to have no issues, right? Then I decided, no. No.

[23 : 49] Why don't I tell him one thing I was wrestling with in that very moment? Not a sin, but just a little vulnerability. Because this person had actually given me permission to briefly share.

And so I just said one thing on my mind. And then this person tried to respond in an appropriate way. And then the very next day, he messaged me to tell me he had prayed for me. And even in that simple act, I found myself encouraged.

And that is exactly what Paul sent Timothy to do. Look again at the end of verse 2. Timothy is sent to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You see, faith is not just a one-off thing that we do when we become Christians. Oh, I believe Jesus, and that's it. No, faith is something we exercise daily.

Because faith, to put it simply, just means trust. And we need encouragement to trust Jesus every day for our sin, for our struggles, for our weaknesses, for our vulnerabilities.

[25 : 06] We need to hear his heart for us every day. That he still loves us even when we stumble into sin. That he will be gentle with us in our struggles.

According to verses 3 and 4, trials and temptations are part of the Christian life. Notice that Paul made sure, even in the very short time he spent with the Thessalonian believers, that they knew at least that.

And certainly, Jesus himself made that very clear from the outset. You want to follow me, he asked? Great! Then take up your cross.

And so trials and temptations are part and parcel of the Christian life. And when they come our way, we all need strength and courage to face them.

And God has designed it so that one big source of strength and courage should come from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

[26 : 10] We need to hear gospel truths regularly from one another. And when we don't provide them to our brothers and sisters, we rob each other of a precious treasure.

You know, Jesus once said in John 13 verse 35, familiar verse, By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

In other words, love is visible, it's tangible, even to the unbelieving world. And so that shows that we shouldn't just be deeply concerned for one another in a very private way that no one else ever knows about.

No, we want to act on that concern. Is there someone that you've been concerned for a while now? Perhaps God is asking you today, Is it time to do something about it?

And when you do that, you might discover something unexpected. This brings us to our third habit. Thirdly, greed progress with celebration. Greed progress with celebration.

[27 : 17] I wonder what was going through Paul's mind as he waited at the seaport for Timothy's ship to arrive back from Thessalonica. Are the Thessalonians okay? You might have thought, do they still love Jesus?

Or have they since moved on to worship some other God? And then as Timothy steps off the ship, Paul says, Okay, let's go Starbucks right now. I'll pay and you'll tell me everything.

And then as they each have a latte, Paul's anxiety begins to give way to a big smile. As Timothy tells him, You know what?

They love you. They have such great memories of your ministry amongst them. They can't wait for you to find a ship back to them. And that's what we discover in verse 6.

But that's not all because we also discover this in verse 6. But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love.

[28 : 16] And that is really, really, really what makes Paul incredibly happy. They have a faith that works and a love that labels all flowing from Christ. Just look at how the words flow from his pen.

Verse 7. Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution, we were encouraged about you because of your faith.

Do you see how the Thessalonian spiritual progress is what really keeps him going in the midst of his own troubles? And that's how powerful a word of encouragement can be.

Or even more amazingly, look at how he speaks in verse 8. For now we really live since you are standing firm in the Lord. Well, can you imagine speaking like that?

This person in my home fellowship group is spiritually growing. That makes me want to dance with joy. That person in my youth group engaged with the Bible for the very first time. That has me singing like never before.

[29 : 14] That's what Paul lives for. Do you think you're the same? Ten years ago, I spoke at a youth camp for a church. The youth camp for a church in West Malaysia.

In fact, it was the very first youth camp I've ever spoken at. And I just met someone who attended that camp very recently. And he told me about what his experience of that camp as a teenager was like.

He told me how it was different from all the previous youth camps that he'd been to. Because he said that the word of God came to them like never before.

He said that I gave them space and made them think like no one else. And that made an impact. And I have to say that that was a surprise to me.

And ten years later, here he is still going as a Christian. And in fact, this person is now engaged to Emi Baru.

[30 : 15] And I can say upon hearing that, like Paul, for now I really live. Or I think about the next youth camp I spoke at, which as it turns out was this very church's own youth camp.

Also ten years ago. And some of the teenagers at that youth camp, I'm glad to report, ten years later, are still standing firm in the Lord. How do I know that?

Because they're still here in this church today. Still seeking to live for Jesus. Still wanting to know the words of Jesus. Still serving others in the name of Jesus.

You know their names. Or I think about Franz, who is a believer from mainland China, whom I helped disciple when I was in the UK. Today he lives in Japan.

And it's a joy to see his very occasional updates on Facebook. To see him trying to apply a Christian worldview to his work in environmental science. To live as a Christian in a country which is tough ground for the Gospel.

[31 : 17] And together with Paul, I say verse 9, how can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?

Well my friends, wouldn't you want to experience that same joy? How can you do so? Ask today, how can I, what can I do to help people grow?

Ask God, Lord can you use me as your instrument of blessing to help someone else in their walk with you? Even if that means stretching me or getting me out of my comfort zone so that I grow myself.

Why not ask God that? And then watch God at work and rejoice in progress. Now of course, sadly, the flip side is true as well.

I can also tell you stories of those who are not currently standing firm in the Lord. I can think of someone whom I met up with to do one-to-one Bible studies for a while. Who told me confidently that he believes 100% in Jesus.

[32 : 24] That he could withstand even persecution. He would never abandon the Lord Jesus. Today, as far as I know, he's not a believer. And that's why the fourth and final habit we'll look at today is crucial.

Fourthly, continue in petition for one another. Continue in petition for one another. Paul is excited to hear the good news about their faith and love.

But he understands that the journey is nowhere near over for these Christians. Indeed, from verse 10, we understand that there is still something lacking in their faith.

Now, what could that be? The second half of the letter tells us there are still some concerns over sexual ethics, over brotherly and sisterly love, over some misunderstandings about the second coming, and about how they should treat leaders.

And we'll see all this in the coming weeks. But that doesn't negate his joy over their progress. It's just a reminder that progress is lifelong.

[33 : 30] At yesterday's Entrust conference, which I was helping at, the speaker said, salvation is not the arrival of a destination, but the acquiring of a compass.

In other words, when we believe in Jesus, that is not the end of the story. We haven't arrived yet. Instead, we keep moving on in the direction that God sets for us as we live out our lives for him until we are finally home.

And so that's why, verse 10, Night and day, we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

See, this is what Paul desires. Face to face interaction for the purposes of instruction, so that he can model a life worthy of imitation, so that all of us will eventually get to our heavenly destination. And that's why we still bother with physical church, rather than just remain online indefinitely. And that's why we pray, as Paul does in verse 11, as our elder Hompak also prayed earlier, that the Lord will clear the way for us all to meet again together.

[34 : 50] For once again, here is Paul's priority, the spiritual progress of the Thessalonian believers. And that spiritual progress is seen when brothers and sisters in Christ overflow in love for one another, that their deep concern and subsequent action will be evident.

And so that forms the basis of his petition, verse 12. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

May he strengthen your hearts, so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father, when our Lord Jesus comes with all his only ones.

May he be blessed? May he pray with his son every night, unless I'm out during his bedtime. And a few months ago, it began to strike me that I should not just teach him to pray for himself, but for others too.

And so now, every night, we pick one person to pray for. Sometimes I choose, so it could very well be one of you whom we pray for.

[36 : 01] Sometimes he chooses, in which case it would often be a classmate or a teacher. And we try to pray that the person will know and love Jesus, whether for the first time or more and more.

And that's because that's what 1 Thessalonians 3 wants us to pray for. By all means, pray for your backache or your exam, because God cares about everything.

But don't neglect praying for one another that we would be blameless and holy when Christ returns.

And so today, I wonder what the Holy Spirit is nudging you to do. Perhaps it's nudging you to have a deeper concern for others, to dare to ask some meaningful questions.

Perhaps it's nudging you to action, to dare to make a sacrifice for Christ for the sake of others.

Perhaps it's nudging you to think about your petitions, to add to them, to change them.

[37 : 06] Or perhaps if you stop for a while, to start making them again. Now, whatever it is, it will be worth it. For just as the Thessalonians and Paul found mutual encouragement, so will we, when we collectively make these our habits.

And so I hope six months from now, twelve months from now, when I look at us again, I can say, let us all rejoice in the progress we've made.

For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when He comes? Is it not you?

Indeed, you are our glory and joy. Let's pray. Father, we thank you again for your word, and we pray that this word especially will be timely in the season that we're in.

We thank you that you have preserved us, even in these two years where it's been quite unsettling at times.

[38 : 31] We thank you that you have kept us going, but we pray now, Lord, that you would indeed supply what is lacking in our faith. You would indeed clear the way that we can come together again to be one church, one body, one family.

Not to be alone together, but to be bound together, knitted together, intimate together. I pray now, Lord, the words of 1 Thessalonians 3, verse 12 and 13, that indeed the Lord may make our love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.

That you may strengthen our hearts, that we might be blameless and holy in your presence when the Lord Jesus comes. Please, Lord, help us to make it to our destination, to make it to our home, to live by your compass.

Help us not to lose anyone along the way. Help us not to let the tempter, to let Satan win. But help us to stand fast in your gospel.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Let us stand and sing our final song. . .

[39 : 50] . . . Amen.