



GLORY AND JOY PART 5: THE GLORIOUS PRIORITY OF FAITH

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I listened to a presentation the other day by a bunch of sociologists describing the public perception of the Christian faith. There is a phrase circulating in the culture today of "extreme Christianity" and while this may sound good, it's not meant to be. It is a derogatory term for fringe, radical and offensive.

I think most reports we hear on the state of the church or Christianity are not nearly as telling as some people make them out to be, but this one was interesting because the responses revealed a trend over and above the numbers. People were asked, "Is it extreme to share the gospel with the desire to convert someone?" Yes, indeed this was considered extreme. Is it extreme to think that your system of belief matters? Yes, extreme. It is extreme to even disagree with someone's life choices. Which means obviously the people surveyed were not parents, nor apparently were they children!

The trend that this showed is a massive individualization of faith. A Christianity ala carte, where you attend your iChurch, listen to you iPastor, and choose your iBelief, and the implications of your faith on those around you and the concern of others around you is irrelevant, un-welcomed and none of anyone's business.

We pick and choose what we like about our faith, and jettison the rest. We see the word of God as a buffet of truths where we take the ones we like, and leave the ones we don't sitting under the heat lamps. More than flattening the life of faith we have severed it from the authority of scripture and the influence of anyone else. We've made ourselves to be our own gods, and we've done it without even skipping church.

But today we are going to see a stark contrast to an individualized and isolated Christianity. In our text today Paul is going to bear his heart openly and almost awkwardly to us regarding his relationship to the Thessalonian church. And in looking at Paul's passion we are going to be able to catch a glimpse of Paul's priority and that priority has implications for us as a church and for you as a individual.

What we are going to look at this morning is this: The glory and joy of the believer is faithfulness in all things, everything else is vanity. And what we are going to do with this text is look at it three different times through three different lenses. Each time we pass by we are going to get close and closer to the heart of what Paul is writing about here in 1 Thessalonians.

The first perspective we want to see in this text is Paul's Experience. We have just finished a long passage, beginning in chapter one verse two, where Paul is praising God for the health of the church in Thessalonica. He says things like, "We thank God for you, you received the word and became an example, we have heard the report of your faith, you accepted the word of God, not as the word of men, but as the word of God."

So Paul is writing out of a knowledge of what is going on in Thessalonica. He knows that there is suffering and opposition, but he knows that the faith of the church is flourishing. But what we are going to see in our text today is Paul describing his experience and thoughts when he was unaware of the state of the church. Let's begin and listen to what Paul underwent in this text: 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5.

Paul's role was that of a missionary. Paul's desire was to travel to the far reaches of the gospel planting gospel centered churches. In Acts 17 we read the story of Paul and Silas coming to Thessalonica. What happens is they preach Christ, the Jews get upset, the Jews instigate the Romans to be upset, and Jews and Romans basically hold a Christian hostage until Paul and Silas leave the area.

We don't know how long they were there, but the text doesn't make it sound like it was any sort of substantial amount of time. And because of this we see Paul has an intense desire to return to them. In fact the word here

translated as "torn away" is one often applied to orphans stripped from their mothers. In Paul's mind his work was unfinished with the church in Thessalonica. So with all of his missionary zeal, Paul tries, again and again to return, but as he said, "Satan hindered" him.

We don't know what this means, but we do know that Paul is citing some real opposition that is keeping him from returning. We can understand how hard this would have been for Paul given the language he has already used in this book, he referred to himself with the church as a nursing mother, treating them like a father treats his children. And now Paul is prevented from seeing them, he knows not of how they are doing, the only thing he knows is that they are facing affliction. If you are a parent you can imagine the turmoil this would bring.

As a result, Paul is willing to send his closest friend away from him to check on the church. Timothy is going to go and bring back a report on what is going on. Next week we will see Timothy's report but in the mean time we see the experience of Paul's concern. Paul is concerned that their faith will be moved or that they would have been tempted away from the gospel.

Now this is important because it is Paul's experience which makes his message compelling. Paul is alone, Paul is in his flesh helpless to do anything, he knows he didn't spend the amount of time he wanted, and he knows the church is experiencing a great trial for a young church. And along with Paul's experience, there is the church in Thessalonica who is afflicted and without Paul's help, and at the same time they are concerned that Paul has either abandoned them or suffered something great. But while the church is concerned about Paul's suffering, Paul is concerned with the church's faith.

This is the second perspective I want us to see in this text, Paul's priority. As I read this I want you to note what Paul's solution is to this current dilemma. What is it that Paul thinks is best for this struggling church? 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5.

If you have spent much time in Montana you know that Lewis and Clark are a big deal up here. They are the icons of the great North West adventure, departing St. Louis and ending at Pacific Ocean in Oregon. Their claim to fame is where they ended up, the Northwest Passage. Now along the way they stopped at numerous settlements, and established a number of camps, forts, and rest stops. We have one just outside of town in Traveler's Rest.

Given the sheer magnitude of what they accomplished, they would not look at the ruins of Travelers Rest and think, "Man, I wish we would have used bricks..." In the same way Paul could have taken boast in end goal of what he accomplished for the Kingdom. God called him to be an apostle to the Gentiles and he went. He went from Jerusalem, to Turkey, to Greece, to Italy, and perhaps even to Spain. But Paul realizes that the importance of the gospel isn't geographic expansion if it comes at the expense of sound faith.

Paul's yearning for the church in Thessalonica is rooted in the glory which comes at the end of the age, not in the measurable results we can count in this one. This series is titled: Glory and Joy. And we find Paul's words to have deep weight here because the glory and joy of Paul is the faith of the church. The measure of Paul's work is what will endure into eternity.

Paul's priority is not the safety of the church, the influence of the church, the acceptability of the church, nor the comfort of the church. Paul's priority is that the church would believe until the end. That Paul's work among them would be a testament to God's work among them and then he would stand on judgment day and say, "praise God for the faith of the Thessalonians."

We are going to look at chapter 3:1-5 again in a second, but what's interesting is that the subject of all Timothy's work and all Paul's concern is the faith of the Thessalonian church. This is important for us because what are we if not defined by our faith? We are creatures of it.

If not defined by faith in a codified religion we are defined by our faith in the product of our perceived pleasures or worldly accomplishments. Even for the stoic who says there is nothing to have faith in, at some level his

creed is based on faith in fatalism, determinism or even relativism. When Paul is concerned with only the faith of the Thessalonians, he is not being impersonal or calculated. In addressing the need for enduring faith in the church Paul is addressing the most basic human need. We are what we believe. What we believe is the source of all our actions.

We all have things we value in our life as glory and joy, they motivate, they animate, and they are typically the first thing we ask to endure us when life is hard. How does that hope in your own heart match Paul's? Does your temporary experience uncover the eternal implications Paul holds up here?

Look at Paul's plea for faith in 1 Thess. 3:1-5. We just read the divide between Paul's Christianity and modern Christianity. Modern Christianity says every man for himself, gospel Christianity calls us to every man before himself. These words show this realization.

Paul's language is so emotional and so passionate, I mentioned at staff meeting I felt like I was reading his diary. And yet God has put it in here for us. Paul is unique in that in his conversion Jesus audibly spoke to him and told him what to do. But the rest of what Paul does and the passion with which he writes doesn't stem from an inaccessible center to the rest of us. What drives Paul's works and desire here is Paul's clear and compelling understanding and trust in the gospel.

What Paul understands is that the ultimate sorrow in life is not dying for the gospel, but living without it. It's easy to look at this passage and see all the suffering in it. But Paul is holding up a target here. If you think of a target you can probably think of three parts, the white space, the outer black lines, and the small bull's eye. The white space exists because it helps the shooter identify the target. Without it, it can become hard to see the central aim. In the same way suffering in this passage is the white space which helps us see the center of Paul's message: your faith. The faith that Paul sent Timothy to establish is that which Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

Paul's priority is gospel faith, and he sent Timothy to encourage the believers in it, but he also reminded the believers of the expectations of the gospel. On April 14th, 1912 the RMS Titanic struck an ice berg in the Atlantic Ocean resulting in one of the deadliest ocean disasters tallying the loss of 1500 lives. Historians and naval experts have tried to discern why the ship struck the ice berg. They say that the ship must have become disoriented because it was a dark and moonless night, which made it hard to see the stars and the horizon. Without these things they crew was forced to use "dead reckoning" hoping to find a direction based off where they hoped the horizon was. Without these markers, it is assumed they guessed wrong, and this was the fatal error of the ship.

For believer's God has not left us to blind dead reckoning when it comes to our faith. This is another reason where incomplete and personalized Christianity breaks down. God in his goodness has revealed many expectations of faith so that we will be not surprised or shaken by anything. This is Paul's message.

Paul wanted Timothy to remind them of that heading he provided while with them. Their faith would not be moved by suffering, and this is something they were to expect. Isn't it strange that we are so shocked at the idea of suffering as an expectation when each and everyone of us knows we all die.

Suffering, though loud and real, is not really a threat to believers who have right expectations about their Christian life. Peter says, 1 Peter 4:12-13. Far from suffering being an enemy to true faith, it causes true faith to rejoice as it is mindful of the glory yet to come. In Acts 17 when the Jews rebel against Paul and Silas they say, "These men are turning the world upside down" And indeed the preached gospel turns the world and its suffering upside down.

Even in Paul's hardship we see this. Paul's experience was that Satan hindered him in coming. Because of this, help was slow to reach the church. But despite Satan's best efforts, the grace of God brought the church to flourish, and that flourishing went on to be an encouragement to the churches in Macedonia, Achaia and everywhere else! Satan's attempt to cause Paul to suffer lead to the flourishing of faith a whole area. And

Satan's attempt to tempt the church in Thessalonica just went on to affirm the salvation that had so captured them. The temptation proved the proper desire! It strengthened the promise it set out to destroy.

Just as is true in Paul's case, beneath our human experience of suffering is a divine plan which we are normally unaware of. In all of our suffering Satan seeks to shake your faith, but the true God seeks to establish your faith by the same suffering. Suffering may come against the believer, but by God's grace suffering is also for the believer as a tool to produce greater faith. You see the real vanity in life is faithlessness, and not even suffering poses a real threat to true faith.

The author of Hebrews says without faith it is impossible to please God. But it's not just faith which Paul values, but the object of faith, the gospel of Jesus Christ. The reason Paul is concerned with faith is not because faith brings people hope in suffering, or makes us more civic, or more generous, or even because it makes us more content. Faith matters to Paul because faith is what brings us to Jesus and that is all that matters in this life.

In closing this is our last perspective of this text today: Our Expectation.

Do you see here that nothing matters in this world except faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Enduring faith. Real faith. To you in here who are skeptical of the gospel, you have faith. You have just dressed it up, perhaps intellectualized it, and made it more palatable to your mind. But you have faith. And if that faith is not faith in the Jesus who died for your sins, you might miss suffering here on earth, but you will find suffering at the judgment seat of God. To you believers in here, is your faith representative of this faith? Or are you comfortable piecing together something which seems more palatable, not knowing a day will come to find you empty?

This is why the church exists. We want to take a page from Paul's passion and fit it as our passion. At Sovereign Hope Church we are not yet where we want to be. We are not yet the portrait of the church Jesus has commissioned us to be. And our elders are not yet the perfect elders that Jesus has called us to be. But I can promise you that as an elder, we are committed to doing whatever it takes to see your faith through to the end. This is what shapes our budget, our ministries, our staff meetings, our elder prayers, and our missions. Enduring gospel faith above all things, in the face of all things.

So we will not shrink back from preaching the whole council of God because the whole council of God is what is needed for you to endure. What this text goes to show today is that the weight of the testimony of God, the weight of the apostles of God, the weight of the church of God, the weight of the work of God is to present you faithful and unmoved at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Any goal or boast outside of that is vanity, emptiness, and worldly success.

We like Paul must be so fitted with the great size of the gospel so that we can displace the isolated individualized faith so rampant in our culture. We want the gospel to make us concerned with the faith of others because we care about the eternity of others. We want the gospel to make us extreme with the pursuit of others in the gospel because we know the glory of God which comes in his salvation.

So we want Paul's passage today to do two things: we want it to fix our expectations back on the proper priorities. We want enduring gospel faith over all things. But secondly we want to repent of places in our lives where we have had faulty priorities and incomplete pictures of the gospel.

We do not endure, nor do we serve in our own strength, but in the strength which God supplies. And so we ask for a spirit of repentance and of grace to turn our eyes onto the eternal implications of the gospel so that we might take glory and joy in the endurance of the church of Christ.

