

A Flock of Model Believers

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模範的な信者の群れ
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ゴットホルド・ベック

1 Thessalonians

2:1 For you yourselves know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a waste of time.
2:2 As you know, we suffered persecution and were mistreated in Philippi. Yet we were encouraged by our God to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.
2:3 For our appeal to you does not spring from deceit, impure motives, or trickery.
2:4 Rather, because we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, we speak as we do, not trying to please people but God, who tests our motives.
2:5 As you know, we did not come with flattering words or with a scheme to make money. God is our witness!
2:6 We did not seek praise from people—from you or from anyone else—
2:7 even though as apostles of the Messiah we might have made such demands. Instead, we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother tenderly caring for her own children.
2:8 We cared so deeply for you that we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but our very lives. That is how dear you were to us.
2:9 Brothers, you remember our labor and toil. We worked night and day so that we would not become a burden to any of you while we proclaimed the gospel of God to you.
2:10 You and God are witnesses of how pure, honest, and blameless our conduct was among you who believe.
2:11 You know very well that we treated each of you the way a father treats his children.
2:12 We comforted and encouraged you, urging you to live in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.
2:13 Here is another reason why we constantly give thanks to God: When you received God's word, which you heard from us, you did not accept it as the word of humans but for what it really is—the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.
2:14 For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Judea that are in union with the Messiah Jesus. You suffered the same persecutions from the people of your own country as they did from those Jews
2:15 who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, who have persecuted us, and who please neither

God nor any group of people,
2:16 as they try to keep us from telling the gentiles how they can be saved. As a result, they are constantly adding to the number of sins they have committed. However, wrath has overtaken them at last!
2:17 Brothers, although we have been separated from you for a little while—in person but not in heart—we eagerly desire to see you again face to face.
2:18 That is why we wanted to come to you. Certainly I, Paul, wanted to come time and again, but Satan blocked our way.
2:19 After all, who is our hope, joy, or reason for rejoicing in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming? It is you, isn't it?
2:20 Yes, you are our glory and joy.
[International Standard Version]

The First Epistle to the Thessalonians was actually the first letter Paul wrote. I suppose he did not even imagine that this letter would remain throughout history as a part of the Bible while he was writing it. This letter was presumably written around AD 50 and is believed to be written in Corinth.

Paul proclaimed the gospel in Thessaloniki on three Sabbaths and introduced Jesus to the people. As a result, a number of people were led to the faith and saved. Their conversion must have made Paul so happy. After all, he realized that it was not the outcome of his own efforts, but was proof that the Lord was still alive and merciful toward them. When Paul realized it, he was compelled to thank the Lord from his heart.

The first chapter of the First Epistle to the Thessalonians describes how active and vibrant the church in Thessaloniki was. We can see from this chapter how people made vibrant testimonies, which in turn made this church vibrant in the true sense and it became a useful vessel to serve the Lord.

Within a few weeks, so many people were led to the salvation through the Gospel of Jesus, who was crucified and then resurrected. It was because they had ears to hear after all.

They had ears to hear because they were in suffering. They were totally at a loss and did not know what to do. They heard about Jesus, who had been crucified and then resurrected, which encouraged them very much. What wonderful news! We no longer have to worry about anything. We can live a life full of hope and peace now; they must have felt this way.

Jews and gentiles became as one, which was unthinkable in those days. They became as one because they received the same spirit, the one Holy Spirit.

Vibrant churches were created by nothing but the miraculous work of the living God. Truly vibrant churches are not man-made organizations, but are unified through true divine strength, that is to say, through the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Churches have a common purpose and are heading toward one goal.

How could this vibrant church of Thessaloniki grow and how could Paul help this great accomplishment? Chapter 2 we just read gives a clear answer to these questions.

What kind of title best suits this chapter 2? This chapter explains how the expectation for the second coming of the Lord encourages the sincere servants and gives them hope to continue their service.

This chapter can be titled as “Paul's Service was Filled with Blessing.” We can title it even simpler as, “It was not Meaningless.” If one can say while reflecting on his or her life that “It was never meaningless,” I would say that it is in itself a wonderful blessing.

In one of many graveyards in Karuizawa, I saw words inscribed on one tombstone, which went, “My wife and I both loved Karuizawa from the bottom of our hearts.” After all, these words were meant for those who are still alive and thus, I must say that they spent a meaningless life.

Contrarily, when we think of Paul's life that was devoted to the service to the Lord, we can say that it was never meaningless at all. Let us break this chapter into two parts. Between the verse 1 and 12, Paul described his own work and that of his co-workers. In these verses, Paul wrote, “we did this.” and “we did that” repeatedly.

Then, from the verse 13 to the last verse, Paul explained the consequences of their work, the church in Thessaloniki and their persecutors. For this explanation, expressions, “you are this” and “you are that” are used a number of times.

Here is an important question; what was the purpose of Paul and his co-workers throughout their lives? What was the goal of their lives? The answer is that what they placed at the center of their lives, what influenced their lives most, was the gospel itself. This is the reason the word 'gospel' appears a number of times in this chapter. This word is used in verses 2, 4, 8 and 9.

People rejoiced when they experienced the power of the Lord, which is capable of saving anyone through the Gospel. Paul and his co-workers came to believe that this Gospel was entrusted to them. To proclaim the Gospel, that is to say, to let others know about

Jesus, is the supreme privilege and mission given to all believers.

We live in a world of sins. The world surrounding us seems to be devastated. People around us are like those lost in the desert and are desperately seeking water at the blink of death. We see such people everywhere.

However, we, as believers of the Lord, are aware of where to find a fountain; we know where the salvation is. This means that we are responsible and obliged to lead to the fountain all those seriously ill people seeking water at the blink of death. The Gospel saved the faith and conviction of Paul and his co-workers from being weakened or vanishing altogether; it gave them the strength to proclaim eloquently and to lead all those wandering around for water to the fountain of life, that is to say, the well of salvation.

They did not just proclaim their own belief or their own thoughts, but also introduced Jesus to the people. The honor of Jesus was all that mattered to them and they did not care about their own honor at all.

The next question is how Paul and his co-workers served. Let us pay attention to this combined expression frequently used in chapter 2; “it was not this, but it was that,” or “we do not do this, instead we did that.” This kind of comparison is used repeatedly. For example, “our visit is not a waste of time,” “our appeal does not spring from trickery,” “we did not try to please people,” “we did not come with flattering words” and so on. Instead, what they actually did is summarized in verse 8—they proclaimed the Gospel to please the Lord and they were even more determined to share their own lives with him.

What was the nature of the service of Paul and his co-workers? The answer to this question is clearly provided in chapter 2. The first verse tells us that they were aware that their service was not wasted or without result. It was never fruitless.

We can see from verse 2 that in spite of strong opposition, they were encouraged by God and forcefully proclaimed the gospel of God. Verse 3 shows us that their proclamation did not spring from trickery, but it came from a pure and clean heart. Verses 4 to 6 help us to understand that the purpose of their service was in nothing but the glory of the Lord. Those who work on behalf of themselves, based on self-centered motivation and relying on their own ability are miserable as believers.

It is described in verses 7 to 9, that they cared very tenderly and were deeply concerned about other believers. Verses 10 to 12 indicate that their

testimonies were not only spoken by words but their lives were themselves eloquent testimonies and their service was based on the sacred and pure lives they lived.

Furthermore, as is described from verses 13 to 18, their service to the Lord made a great accomplishment as their proclamation was accepted as the word of God. As we can see from verses 19 and 20, as they served the Lord, their eyes were constantly fixed on the return of the Lord, and they maintained their faith firmly as they waited for his Advent.

In other words, they cared about each one of the believers as best as they could, just like mothers nurtured their children and fathers took care of them. It can be seen from verses 7 and 11.

Today, those who serve the Lord in the same way as Paul did will see rich fruits of their service, like believers in those days experienced. It is through such service to the Lord, that new vibrant churches are created.

What we learn from the way Paul and his co-workers worked is that for them, the proclamation of the Gospel was worth devoting their whole lives. This can be understood from verse 8. We also see in verse 12 that as they proclaimed the gospel, they stressed on the Lord's call for each one of us into his kingdom and its glory. It is because of this that we are urged to live in a manner worthy of the Lord God.

What was special about Paul and his co-workers? It was their absolutely selfless devotion to the Lord, willing readiness to suffer for the Lord and their sincerity filled with love.

They never cared about their own lives; instead they always wished for the churches and the flock of believers to be cleansed and evolve. They cared about each one of their brothers and sisters just like parents cared for their children. They sincerely prayed for brothers and sisters not to stumble, not to be separated from the Lord.

There is another question. Let us discuss quickly how their service to the Lord affected the people. The reaction of people to the Gospel is always one of two; it is either completely accepted, or it is completely rejected.

Brothers and sisters in Thessaloniki accepted the proclaimed Gospel as the pure word of God according to the verse 13. This was the very reason that Paul and his co-workers were compelled to offer their heartfelt gratitude.

According to verse 14, believers in Thessaloniki not only accepted the word of the Lord, but began to

spread his word by themselves. They became imitators of the churches of God and they did not fear affliction or persecution. They realized from their own experience that all disciples of Jesus Christ were destined to be misunderstood and persecuted.

It is stated in verse 20 that believers in Thessaloniki were truly the glory and joy of Paul and his co-workers. This exactly was the outcome of the service of Paul and his co-workers. Similarly today, those who open their minds to the word of God, accept and believe in it will be given an eternal life.

Most of us have now understood from our own experience that our sins were forgiven and we have peace with the Lord God. However, even among us believers, I have to say that very few can be truly regarded as the glory and joy of the Lord.

Believers in Thessaloniki accepted the word of God and through strong opposition, they became imitators of the churches of God. Their faith did not fall apart because of their pains and agonies, but rather, it became even more determined. It was possible because they took their eyes off from what was visible and looked into something their eyes could not see. They accepted all things provided by the Lord.

In their daily lives, believers in Thessaloniki led an absolutely selfless life and obeyed the requirement of God. This made them the glory and joy of Paul and his co-workers. This indicates that, for Paul and his co-workers, the foundation of mission activity and proclamation of the Gospel was the word of God and no other.

Wherever the word of the Lord is accepted, there is a life, while conflict and hatred arise where his word is rejected. Believers in Thessaloniki never heard the word of God purposelessly. They heard the voice of the Lord through his word in the Bible.

They accepted and believed in the word of God through which they experienced the encounter with Jesus. Finally, Jesus became everything to them. They were convinced that the Lord God had spoken directly to each one of them through his word in the Bible and it helped them to maintain sincere faith throughout their lives.

Contrarily to believers in Thessaloniki, most of the Jews did not listen to the word of God seriously and it did not touch their hearts. Consequently, Jews slaughtered many prophets who were sent by the Lord. Furthermore, they crucified Jesus and even persecuted Paul. It is an absolute tragedy to listen to his word without being touched in our hearts.

We too have heard so many words of God. Did they vanish meaninglessly? Or did they work inside us?

1 Thessalonians

2:13 ...the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

That is to say, the word of God is eagerly waiting to work on us and it is actually capable of working in us. A wonderful proof of this fact can be found so easily in a flock of vibrant believers in Thessaloniki. It is a very critical issue whether the word of God may dwell in our hearts and work on us, or not.

Let me finish this sermon with this wonderful call from the Lord from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 66, verse 3;

Isaiah

66:2 But this is the one to whom I will look favorably: to the one who is humble and contrite in spirit, and who trembles at my message.

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