

## Christian Growth

Psalm 1; 2 Thessalonians 1:3–5

When a new baby comes into the world, parents, caregivers and doctors are very concerned to keep close track of the baby's weight. Has the baby regained its birth weight? Is it continuing to gain weight? Does it have a healthy appetite?

Why?

Because, for a newborn, putting on weight indicates growth. It is natural that living things grow, and that they grow at a normal rate. These are indications of health. The goal is a healthy newborn.

In our text this morning Paul writes, “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.” Notice the words “grows” and “abounds.” The church at Thessalonica was a newborn church, and the fact that there was growth was an indicator the apostle Paul keenly kept his eyes on.

Actually, there was a *lot* of growth! The word in the original, ὑπεραυξάνω, from ὑπέρ, an intensifier, and αυξάνω, *grow, increase*, is used only here. It is not found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It could well have been coined by the apostle Paul as he wrote this letter. One Greek scholar, Dr. Clarke, rendered this special, intensive word as *grow luxuriantly*, like a healthy tree in good, well-watered soil.<sup>1</sup>

Psalm 1 comes to mind. There, the Psalmist speaks of a “a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper.” We will sing that Psalm after the sermon. One thinks also of the scene in the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22, which speaks of a “pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” Here is the ascended Christ's end-time goal for his church: that it will be healthy and produce an abundance of spiritual fruit. Will this actually happen? It surely will, for Christ is sovereign and capable of accomplishing all his holy will. No one is better at keeping a promise. Though the church might struggle now in this vale of tears, our mighty Lord has a great plan for us.

Brothers and sisters, we are in a spiritual warfare. The enemy of our souls is bent on destroying us. He will fail, of course, but in the meantime his minions mock and ridicule us. Yesterday the internet was abuzz about the vile mockery of the Last Supper at the Olympics opening ceremony. But though the enemies of Christ insulted the faith, Christ himself will get the last word, and he will be

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in *Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*, 2 Thess. 1:3 (Logos Bible Software)

victorious. At the final day his saints will be like well-watered trees, bringing forth an abundance of fruit in season. This will be accomplished by the regenerating work of God's Holy Spirit, working true faith in the hearts of his people.

When the Spirit works in a person's heart, the result is luxuriant spiritual growth—an eagerness to know the Scriptures, a hearty spiritual appetite, a yearning to grow in grace, and a zeal for good works. This really cannot be faked. It is the result of a born-again heart sold out to Christ, desirous of pleasing God.

Jesus taught that a tree is known by its fruit. A good tree brings forth good, nourishing, satisfying fruit. A person born again by the Holy Spirit wants to please the Lord and bring forth the fruit of obedience and good works in his life.

In the case of the Thessalonians, Paul had sowed and watered, and God had given an abundant increase. Their faith was multiplied, and their love abounded. Here was a faithful church nurtured and tended by conscientious shepherds desirous of guiding God's people properly.

As we look at this text this morning, consider three things highlighted here by the apostle Paul: *faith*, *love* and *patience*; first,

### **1. Faith**

Notice two references to faith: “We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren . . . because your *faith* grows exceedingly . . . we ourselves boast of you among the churches . . . for your patience and *faith*.”

*Faith* is the persuasion that something is true. Faith in Christ is the very essence of Christianity. In the book of Acts we read of “*the faith*”—of priests who were “obedient to *the faith*,” of a false prophet who sought to turn someone away “from *the faith*,” of Paul and Barnabas exhorting disciples “to continue in *the faith*,” of churches being “established in *the faith*.” Paul writes to Timothy, “my own son in *the faith*.”

Clearly, “the faith” is a synonym for Christianity. When we Christians meet together, it is for the purpose of practicing our faith.

The Westminster Confession defines faith as “the act of believing.”<sup>2</sup> Paul writes: “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt *believe* in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man *believeth* unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever *believeth* on him shall not be ashamed” (Rom. 10:9–11). Notice the words “believe” and “believeth.” According to the Bible, Christians are people who believe in Christ's resurrection from the dead. Here is the only founder of a world religion who said, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and . . . scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles

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<sup>2</sup> WCF 11.1, [https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter\\_11](https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_11)

to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and *the third day he shall rise again*”—and then made good on his promise. Jesus Christ rose from the dead!

Have *you* ever seen anyone rise from the dead? No! Even with advances in medical science, man does *not* have the ability to raise a dead body from the grave. What about a corpse that had lain in the tomb three whole days? Impossible! So why do we believe that *Christ* rose from the dead? Because of the testimony of numerous credible witnesses: men and women who were so convinced that this man they so highly esteemed had risen from the dead that they would not deny it, even under threat of death. Many of them indeed chose death, rather than deny what they knew to be true: that Jesus of Nazareth, having been put to death on a Roman cross and laid in a stone tomb for three days and nights, guarded by Roman soldiers, rose from the dead on the first day of the week and was seen by multiple witnesses, many of whom did not believe at first, till he appeared to them and spoke with them, convincing them that he was alive.

Communicant members of Grace OPC, eligible to partake at the Lord’s table, give assent to the following vows: “Do you *believe* the Bible to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the true doctrine of salvation? Do you *believe* in one living and true God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, equal in power and glory—and that Jesus Christ is God the Son, come in the flesh?” As Christians, we profess to believe the *Bible*, God’s testimony concerning himself, and to believe in the *God* of the Bible, the God who has revealed himself in Holy Scripture. The God who reveals himself is invisible—in the words of the hymn, “immortal, invisible, God only-wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes.” We have never seen him with our eyes. Yet having not seen him, we believe in him, and not only that, we love him. This is the Christian faith.

How does faith grow? The Bible gives the answer: “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Faith grows in the same way that it originates in the first place: by hearing the word of God. Faith grows by hearing the word preached in the company of a faithful church. Hearing the preaching of the word is one of the regular means of grace—the Word, the sacraments, prayer. Unless a person is providentially hindered, he ought to be part of a faithful church. Sometimes this requires a willingness to travel. Travel requires time, money, inconvenience and sacrifice. Is it worth the investment? Absolutely! For as Proverbs says, “Buy the truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding” (Prov. 23:23). As Christians, we must be willing to pay the price. Our heavenly Father, who owns the cattle on a thousand hills, who never lacks for resources, is ready and willing to repay. He will be no man’s debtor!

The biggest reason why people don’t grow in the faith is not lack of resources but lack of *desire*. Be honest: there are plenty of things in your life that you are willing to spend big bucks on. Where does your faith rank in your list of priorities?

Faith is the persuasion that something is true. We Christians believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and our God. This is not a mere preference—something we might give up in the interest of being more inclusive. No! The end goal is not being inclusive but being a faithful witness to the truth. Jesus Christ is Lord and God. That is not something we are willing to negotiate away in a vain attempt to make ourselves look more respectable or mainstream. Our goal is not acceptance by the prevailing culture but faithfulness to God.

Moreover, we want to grow in our faith. We want to earn the commendation of Christ, as did the church in Thessalonica. Our goal is to grow in our faith. If faith does not grow, there is something amiss.

We are concerned for family members and friends who, when pressed, say they believe in Jesus but, as far as we can tell, there's no evidence of growth. They don't have an appetite for the Word, they don't go to church, they do not associate with Christians. They do not seem to make any progress in their Christian life. Are they saved, or not? God alone knows the heart, but there doesn't seem to be any fruit. And so we pray in earnest: God have mercy on them!

When you study a philosophy, or a scientific discipline, or a particular field of learning, you can become an expert in the subject without embracing or agreeing with it. For instance, you can become an expert in Marxism without becoming a Marxist. But the word of God is not calling on us merely to be experts in the truths of the Christian religion. Christianity is not just a philosophy that is to be studied and understood. It is not just a set of bullet points that are to be memorized. No! Rather, it is an assertion that Jesus Christ is Lord—the supreme sovereign, the absolute ruler of the universe. There is no one higher than he. He is Lord, and as Lord he will ultimately be victorious. The Father has “highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Amen!

Brothers and sisters, let us *grow* in the faith. That is point 1. Second, consider **2. Love**

Paul has observed that the Thessalonians' faith was growing “exceedingly”—that is, as we observed a moment ago—was growing *luxuriantly*, like a well-watered tree in fertile soil. But this is not all; he goes on to observe that “the *love* of every one of you all abounds toward each other.”

The Bible teaches love for God (the first table of the law) and love for our fellow man (the second table of the law). God's law requires perfect love for God and perfect love for our fellow man. God's standard is absolute perfection. If we achieved that, then we wouldn't need to be saved. But as fallen creatures who fell in the first sin of our forefather Adam, we all fall short of God's perfect standard.

Thus, we need a Savior, the only mediator between God and man—the man Christ Jesus. He is the only person to measure up to God’s standard. The gospel teaches that on the cross our sins were laid on Christ: “the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6). And when we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, as did Abraham, then our faith is counted to us as righteousness (Rom. 4:3). Being saved by grace, through faith is necessarily followed by a life of good works, the fruit of a true faith. The good works that God requires essentially boil down to love for God and love for our fellow man. If we do not love our fellow man—especially our brothers and sisters in Christ—then we do not really love God either. The apostle John puts it this way: “he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (1 John 4:20).

As Paul observed the church in Thessalonica through the testimony he kept hearing, he was overjoyed to see that “the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other.” The love that he speaks of in this instance is love for our fellow man—second-table love.

Sometimes it is hard to love our fellow man. God is a perfect being. He never wrongs us, he never offends us. But people that are around us are *not* perfect. Even if they are well-meaning—not always the case—they can be difficult to be around. They sometimes offend us. Misunderstandings arise. Feelings get hurt. Bitterness results.

God clearly says, “See that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently” (1 Pet. 1:22), but can any of us say that we do that perfectly? We are self-centered. We care more about our own feelings than the feelings of others. We justify our bad behavior. We flatter ourselves that we are better than we really are. This is not good.

But here in our text the apostle Paul, under divine inspiration, is saying that “the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other.” Note: not just a few, but “every one of you all.” This is amazing! Paul is not talking about a feigned love but true, Christian love—ἀγάπη love—the selfless love that Christ had for his church, being expressed by every single member of the body. Have any of us ever witnessed a church like that? What do we make of this? Here, indeed, at this early stage of church history, the Holy Spirit had done a mighty miracle in the congregation at Thessalonica. Will he do it here in Lansing as well? Is this something that we pray for? Do each and every one of us have a personal desire to be instruments of Christ’s love, caring for all the members of Christ’s body, being willing to sacrifice for one another, to minister to each other, to desire one another’s good? Brothers and sisters, let us pray that the love of every one of us all might abound toward each other! Let us have particular regard for “the least of these.”

We have considered faith and love; thirdly, consider

### 3. Patience in tribulation

Paul writes, “we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure.” Note that the circumstances in Thessalonica weren’t ideal. What was being achieved in Thessalonica was not because conditions were perfect—they were not!—but because the grace of God was overpowering the forces of evil. Here was a church that was experiencing persecution and trouble, but the members were strong in faith and growing in patience. For the Thessalonians faith was not just a slogan but a reality.

Not many of us actually experience persecution, but some Christians do. Voice of the Martyrs reports that in countries like Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Laos, India and Egypt, our brothers and sisters in Christ are often driven from their homes by family members, their communities, extremist groups and others opposed to their faith in Christ. They pay a high price for following the Lord, sometimes leaving with nothing but the clothes on their backs.<sup>3</sup>

O how we ought to pray for Christians who stand for Christ in spite of losing their homes, their livelihood, their health, their family—everything. What if this happened to us? Would we remain faithful? One hears of committed Christians even in our own country who are sentenced to forty years in prison for praying outside an abortuary. If you were imprisoned for the cause of Christ, would you remain faithful?

Not many of us experience actual persecution, but we do experience trouble. In this fallen world, trouble is inevitable. This is as it should be. What if becoming a Christian meant that everything would always be rosy? If that were the case, would not millions of people want to become Christians for the wrong reason? God wants people to love him and worship him because he is good, not because they are rewarded with an easy life. Long ago, Eliphaz the Temanite observed: “Yet man is *born unto trouble*, as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7).

Yes, in this world it is inevitable that we will experience trouble. Some of us will also experience persecution for our faith. We need to consider: are we following Christ so that we can have an easy life? That’s not an option. As a poet once said, “God hath not promised skies always blue.” If you thought he did, you need a reality check. Maybe everything is going well for you right now. If so, be thankful, but be forewarned: things may not always be so. Some churches preach the so-called “prosperity gospel.” They teach that God wants his people to be rich and successful, and that if you are not rich, it is your fault, because you don’t have enough faith. Now there have been wealthy believers in the past—Abraham and Job come to mind. But they did not always have an easy life.

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<sup>3</sup> Email received 7-27-24

The Psalmist testified: “The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell got hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow.” What was his response? “Then called I upon the name of the LORD; O LORD, I beseech thee, deliver my soul.” What was the basis of this prayer? His understanding that “*Gracious* is the LORD, and righteous; yea, our God is *merciful*” (Ps. 116:3–5).

God wants us all to experience patience in tribulation. He wants his Word to steel us for the conflict. His mercy and grace will sustain us. That’s his promise. Amen.