

## **The Peculiar Character of Brotherly Love (1 Thessalonians 4:9-12)**

**Matthew Williams**

Google has made all manner of former necessities obsolete. Who needs a dictionary? Just google it. Who needs a recipe card? Just google it. Who needs a book map, an encyclopedia, a paper calendar of events, an appliance repair manual, a phone book, or a travel agent? Just ask the ever-present, never-reluctant, blue, red, yellow, and green icon on your smartphone, or laptop. Relationship advice? Check. Spiritual counsel? Check. Hours of funny cat videos? Check. No matter what you want to know or why you want to know it, Google is ready to help. It can be and do all kinds of things.

But I'll tell you something Google can't do (among other things). It can't replace a good friend. Why not? Because it hasn't the slightest bit of affectionate desire for your welfare. It's not personally concerned for you. If you're grieving, Google isn't sad. If you're rejoicing, Google isn't happy. It can help you remember your birthday, but it's not grateful for the gift of your life. It can do all kinds of things for you, but it doesn't feel anything toward you. It doesn't love you or anyone for that matter, which doesn't necessarily alarm us because we don't expect it to. It's just a computer program.

We expect more from a friend, don't we? Whether the friend is a spouse, a sibling, a co-worker, or a roommate, we don't just want them to do things for us. Cook dinner. Move the car. Fix the spreadsheet. Empty the trash. We want them to feel things toward us – compassion when we're sick, anger when we've been hurt, joy when we're doing well, or sorrow when we're struggling.

Faithful Christian ministry is no different. Being a faithful brother or sister in Christ isn't about being some kind of spiritual service provider. Relationship advice? I can share it. Financial assistance? I can give it. Truth from God's Word? I can speak it. Security on Sunday morning? I can do it. Snack for Community Group? I can bring it. Periodic prayer when life is hard? I can cover it.

We can do all of those things, friends, and still lack what is most important. You know what it is? It's an emotion. It's called an affectionate desire for the spiritual welfare of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We often talk and hear about the importance of believing what is true and doing what is right. That's critical. But God isn't just concerned about what we think and do. He's concerned about what we

feel. He's concerned about our emotions – and not just toward Him, but toward one another in the church.

The Lord is a deeply emotional person. Love, anger, jealousy, joy, grief, compassion, hatred. So many of the emotions we feel reflect (even when corrupted by sin) something true of the emotional life of our Creator. It's part of what it means to be made in His image. God doesn't just do things for us. He feels things toward us.

Jeremiah 31:20, "Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, declares the LORD."

Faithful Christian ministry reflects the character of Creator in that it springs from an affectionate desire for the spiritual welfare of our brothers and sisters in Christ. At the end of 1 Thessalonians 2 and all of 1 Thessalonians 3, the Apostle Paul provides a compelling example of exactly that sort of desire, a desire expressed through an intense variety of emotions toward the Christians in Thessalonica.

He's not just getting a few things off his chest. He's modelling – for the Thessalonians and for us – the emotional wellspring of faithful Christian ministry. By revealing what he felt toward the Thessalonians, Paul teaches us what we should feel toward fellow believers, especially the members of your own church. I think there are at least four categories of emotion in this passage.

### **1) DELIGHT IN THEM (2:17-20)**

In verse 17, the Apostle says, "we endeavored all the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you..." Clearly, there is no lack of desire in Paul's heart to get face-time with the Thessalonians. And not the iPhone kind. The real kind. He longs to be with them. In fact, the phrase "we were torn away from you" – speaking of their sudden departure – is more literally translated, "we were orphaned from you."

In 1st century Greek, a single word describes the experience of children being separated from their parents and parents being separated from their children. In other words, Paul isn't just missing a friend. He feels like a spiritual parent who has been forcibly separated from his spiritual children. It's an apt metaphor. After all, he (along with Silvanus and Timothy) was the one who introduced them to Jesus and

taught them how to trust and obey him before Jewish persecution forced him to leave the city.

Paul badly wanted to see them again. It killed him when Satan kept hindering him from returning to visit. We don't know how Satan did that or how Paul recognized the work of the Evil One. All we know is both human enemies and spiritual enemies kept Paul away from the brothers and sisters he longed to see face to face. But why? Why was his longing to see them so intense?

Look at verse 19. Because the Thessalonians were his "hope" and "joy" and "crown of boasting." Or as he summarizes in verse 20, "For you are our glory and joy."

Throughout his letters, Paul describes the Christian life as a spiritual race where the finish line is the day Jesus comes back to judge the living and the dead. Those who cross the finish line as victors on the day of his appearing are those who persevered in following Jesus in this life by fulfilling the mission He's given us. Young and old, rich and poor, black and white, new Christian and seasoned saint, we share the same mission. We've been entrusted with the same responsibility.

Matthew 28:18–20, "Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.'" Helping other people enjoy a growing relationship with God, showing them how to love and follow him, that's the mission Jesus has given us and the basis by which we will be judged faithful or unfaithful when he returns.

It's like the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. If you're a Christian, Jesus has entrusted to you a priceless gift – the good news of the gospel. He hasn't given us that gift simply so we can survive the troubles of life and make it home to heaven. He's given us that gift because He has purposed – in the perfection of His sovereign wisdom – to use us (feeble as we are) to help non-Christians *begin* to trust and obey Him and to help Christians *continue* to trust and obey Him in greater and deeper ways until the Lord returns.

The measure of our life as believers isn't personal holiness – defined in some sort of narrow isolation from other Christians. The measure of our life, the finish line Jesus has saved and empowered us to pursue, is the spiritual welfare of the people around us. Paul knows as much, which is why describes his fellow Christians, his



spiritual brothers and sisters in Thessalonica, as his “crown of boasting before the Lord Jesus at his coming.”

He’s not anticipating a moment of arrogance – “Check out all the people who became Christians because of me. You sure picked a good one, Jesus, when you called me to be an apostle!” No. He’s anticipating the joy of faithfulness. As Jesus Himself says to God the Father in Hebrews 2:13, “Behold, I and the children God has given me.”

The finish line Paul awaits, the victor’s crown he longs to attain, is the day when Jesus returns and Paul can say, “Lord, by your grace and your grace alone, here are the men and women I helped to love and follow you. Their perseverance in the faith has been my hope, my joy, and my long-awaited crown of boasting which I cast now at your feet for it is you and you alone who kept me faithful and enabled me to fulfill your call on my life.” The Great Commission in Matthew 28 makes clear that the spiritual welfare of our brothers and sisters in Christ – whether they’re running the race well or faltering mid-course – isn’t just an apostolic concern. It’s a Christian concern. It’s an every-member concern.

So I ask, friend, if you’re a Christian, can you honestly say that your brothers and sisters in Christ your “glory and joy”? Is your heart filled with a deep delight in their spiritual welfare? Are you lovingly concerned with how the Christians around you are doing? Or are you selfishly consumed with your own troubles and issues such that your hopes and joys have nothing to do with anyone but yourself?

By the way, I would be remiss as a pastor if I didn’t take this moment to say to all the members of this church how much you are a delight to me. I’m preaching and praying, counseling and training, rejoicing, weeping, and serving because on the day Jesus returns I want all of you (and hundreds more from this city and around the world) to be standing there with me in grateful awe at the salvation Jesus has accomplished for us and the indescribable joy of eternity with Him.

The first and most important thing we should feel toward fellow believers – including those who are very different than us and take a lot of work to know and love – is an abiding joy and delight in them and their spiritual welfare.

## **2) CONCERN FOR THEM (3:1-5)**



Paul's delight in the Thessalonians and desire to see them thriving spiritually translated into a second category of emotion – a holy concern for them in the midst of suffering. Look at 3:3. Why did Paul give up the sweet companionship of one of his closest co-workers (Timothy) and send him to “establish and exhort” the Thessalonians in their faith? He was concerned “that no one be moved by these afflictions.”

We don't know exactly what was happening to the Thessalonians. If the way Paul was treated in their city is any indicator, the persecution they faced as new believers was severe. So much so, that Paul was afraid Satan would take advantage of their suffering to sabotage their resolve to persevere in following Jesus. Verse 5, “For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.”

Few experiences are more fraught with spiritual peril and potential than suffering. It doesn't even have to be the affliction of religious persecution – though for many believers in other countries it is. It might be the affliction of chronic mental illness. The affliction of being widowed. The affliction of prolonged singleness. The affliction of infertility, or wayward children, or financial distress. God didn't create us for a world of suffering. He died on the cross and rose from the grave so that one day, for His people, suffering will be no more. But until that day, it hurts. Pain lingers. Sorrows multiply. And the testing of our faith continues.

In those situations, which all of us face, there are two things we need (among others). First, we need to check our expectations. Our relative prosperity in the west tempts us to conclude a materialistic form of “heaven on earth” is a reasonable expectation – a good job, a nice house, well-rounded kids, a comfortable retirement, with top-notch healthcare to boot.

Friends, Jesus didn't promise us any of those things. In fact, He told us to expect trouble. To expect a lifelong struggle with the fleeting vanity of a fallen world. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of as much in verse 4. “Remember guys, when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction.” It always hurts, but you shouldn't be surprised, shocked, or think there must be something wrong. Something is wrong. But the problem isn't God. It's sin.

Yet even the ravages of sin without and within don't escape God's sovereign control. Verse 3 – “You yourselves know that we are destined for this.” God is using our afflictions, brothers and sisters, right now, in your life and mine, to make us



more like Jesus. As the Son learned obedience through what He suffered, so do we. And as the Son was resurrected and vindicated after a life of suffering, so will we. We need to check out expectations.

But there's a second thing we need in the midst of suffering that tempts us to abandon the faith. We need brothers and sisters around us to actively "establish" and "exhort" us in our faith so that we are not "moved by these afflictions." That was Paul's concern. It's why he sent Timothy. And it's why we need to make the same kind of relational sacrifices he made to care for the believers around us in their suffering.

Concerned movement toward one another for the purpose of establishing and exhorting one another in the midst of suffering can take a thousand forms. For Paul, it meant stepping outside his relational comfort zone, laying down his friendship with Timothy so Timothy could serve the Thessalonians. For you it might require a similar relational sacrifice. We all want to find a comfortable circle of companions and sail into the sunset with an unchanging entourage.

Faithful, Christian ministry and the affectionate desire for the spiritual welfare of others from which it springs is radically different. It doesn't start with what makes me comfortable. It starts with what do other people need to not lose heart in the midst of suffering.

If you move relationally toward someone to find out where they might be suffering, could the conversation get awkward? Yes. Could things get messy? Yes. Will you be confronted with all manner of problems you can't solve? Yes. If you try to help someone who's suffering, will they sin against you at some point? Probably. Will you sin against them at some point? Probably. Will you ever catch yourself thinking, "Why can't I just enjoy my life with my family and close friends? Don't we have enough going on? I don't think I have what it takes to care for other people. It's just too uncomfortable and too costly."

Friend, Paul understands the challenge. Being left behind alone at Athens wasn't easy for him either. But more importantly, so does the Lord. Do you think dying on the cross was comfortable? Imagine the cost of living in a broken world 33 years beforehand. Jesus did that for you not only so you could enjoy relationship with Him forever, but also to free and empower you to joyfully follow His example.

Something is terribly wrong in our souls if we are isolated from, blind to, or unmoved by suffering saints around us. What should we feel toward our fellow believers? A holy anxiety and concern for them that compels us to move toward them so we can establish and exhort them in the faith. God knows. God sees. God loves you. God's in control. Don't lose heart. You're going to make it. Jesus will bring you home.

We should feel delight in them. We should feel concern for them. We should also feel...

### **3) COMFORT THROUGH THEM (3:6-10)**

The palpable tension in Paul's heart is finally resolved in verse 6 – "...Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you..."

The news couldn't be better. The Thessalonians are not falling away in the midst of suffering. They're pressing in. They're persevering in faith and love. They don't despise Paul for leading them down the hard and narrow way that leads to life. They long to see him just as much as he longs to see them! I almost expect him to say in verse 7, "Praise God! You guys seems to be doing great. So I'll shift all my emotional energy and engagement elsewhere." No. What does he say?

"For this reason, brothers, in all OUR distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord." When your heart is filled with delight in someone's spiritual welfare, when you're deeply concerned for their faith in the midst of suffering, and then you they tell you, "The Lord is meeting me. The Lord is helping me. I'm not losing heart or giving up," guess what you're going to feel? Guess what God in his infinite wisdom designed us to feel? JOY.

How does that work? How did the Thessalonians doing well in the midst of *their* suffering bring Paul comfort in the midst of *his* suffering? It works like this. If your deepest and strongest desires are for your own comfort and ease, what are you going to feel when other people are thriving spiritually (even in suffering) and you're struggling? Envy. Bitterness. "Praise God, brother. When are you going to let me on the blessing train?"

Now what if your deepest and strongest desires (like Jesus) are for the spiritual welfare of your fellow believers? What are you going to feel when you hear how they are thriving spiritually in the midst of suffering? You're going to feel comfort. Why? Because God's answering your prayers. You see Him at work. You're reminded of His faithfulness and compelled to keep trusting Him with your own sorrows.

What do we tend to do in the midst of our own distress and affliction? We turn inward, we become more self-focused, and spin in an endless loop trying to figure out why God's not changing our situation. What does God want us to do? He wants us to check our hearts and actively fight against self-centeredness by crying out to Him for a fresh desire for spiritual welfare of others – not as some sort of head-game or distraction from our own troubles but as an opportunity to experience his comfort in the midst of them as we listen to our brothers and sisters testify that the Lord is good.

That's exactly what happens in verse 9. Have the sources of Paul's distress and affliction gone away? No. But what does he feel in the midst of them? Gratitude toward God for the joy of witnessing his faithfulness to the Thessalonians. Rejoicing in God's faithfulness to uphold those we love doesn't take away our troubles. It gives us spiritual strength to persevere through them. Verse 8, "For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord."

#### **4) CONFIDENCE ABOUT THEM (3:11-13)**

One of the reasons Paul was so eager to see the Thessalonians face to face was his desire (verse 10) to "supply what is lacking" in their faith. They weren't "lacking" in the sense that they had yet to exercise genuine saving faith in Jesus. They were "lacking" in the sense that all of us are also lacking.

No matter how long you've been a Christian, there are always areas of your heart and life where you need to grow in trusting and obeying Jesus more fully. Faithfulness isn't a status we achieve. It's a direction we run. Paul cares for the Thessalonians so he's eager to personally strengthen their faith.

Yet notice where his confidence for their future lies. He could have fallen back on his preaching – after all, he was an Apostle who had seen the risen Christ. He could have fallen back on his letters – I've never received a personal letter that also happened to be the inerrant Word of God, but I imagine it was pretty helpful for the





Thessalonians. When he thinks about their future, Paul's trust doesn't lie in his preaching or his writing. It lies in the purifying power of God. His spiritual confidence isn't in the work he can do, but in the work God will do.

May the Lord "direct our way to you" so we can supply what is lacking in your faith. Absolutely. More importantly, however, may the Lord (verse 12) "make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all," (verse 13) "so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."

Paul knows holiness couldn't be more important for the Thessalonians and for us. It is for good reason Hebrews 12:14 warns us, "Strive for...the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." If we are not holy, brothers and sisters, if we are not bringing every area of our life in submission to King Jesus, the day of His return will not be a day of joy. It will be a day of terror. The Lord is a just judge. He will not leave the guilty unpunished.

To "strive" for holiness takes hard work – really hard work. To "abound in love for one another and for all" is to walk a difficult and painful road of putting selfishness to death and learning to care for others the way God cares for us. What Paul's praying for requires strenuous activity for us no less than for the Thessalonians. But his hope for the future isn't in their activity. It's in the Lord. We must take care to do the same, especially with those we dearly love and for whose spiritual welfare we are deeply concerned.

Resist the temptation to be their savior. Refuse to try and make them holy through subtle manipulation or not-so-subtle ultimatums. The holiness the Thessalonians needed, the holiness your fellow Christians needs, is ultimately a work only God can bring to pass. Whether we're talking about your spouse, your children, your friends, or another member in our church – God is the one who changes hearts. God is the one who progressively sanctifies all who are willing to follow Him, making us holy as He is holy, in preparation for the day of His return.

When we think about what the future holds for a fellow Christian we shouldn't be anxious. We should be confident. Even if they are struggling mightily with sin, even if they are caught in scandalous sin, this we know. God is for them. God is working in them. God will not fail to make His own holy as He is holy. So we pray with confidence, knowing the God who told Israel at the beginning of Leviticus 20:8,

“Keep my statutes and do them,” is the same God who promised Israel at the end of Leviticus 20:8, “...I am the LORD who sanctifies you.”

## **CONCLUSION**

Delight. Concern. Comfort. Confidence. That’s what affectionate desire for the spiritual welfare of our brothers and sisters in Christ feel like in action. The emotions Paul felt toward the Thessalonians are not emotional options for people who are naturally emotional. They are emotional necessities for every follower of Christ. They are the wellspring of faithful, Christian ministry. We cannot fulfill the mission Jesus has entrusted to us without them.

God isn’t just concerned about what we think or do. He’s concerned about what we feel. He’s an emotional God who displays his glory through our own emotions, especially the feelings we have toward one another in the church. It doesn’t matter if the Christian you’re talking to is older or younger, male or female. If they are in Christ, then our hearts should be filled with affectionate desire for their spiritual welfare and our delight, concern, comfort, and confidence should reflect as much.

After all, we’re talking about the bride of Christ, the church body Jesus will one day present to Himself in splendor (Ephesians 5:27), “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.” May we delight in those whom God delights. May we be concerned for those whom God is concerned. May we find comfort in those whom God helps. And may we be confident about those whom God sanctifies. Jesus affectionate desire for the church deserves nothing less.