

May 17, 2020
When Times Get Tough, the Tough ...
1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

For me, Victoria Day Weekend has always symbolically marked the beginning of summer.

- For those who don't work weekends, it's often a time to go camping.
- We feel we can safely plant frost-sensitive plants like begonias.
- Hopefully, we get no more snow (till at least the end of September)

It's happy time, a joyful time, a time to celebrate summer. This year is a bit different. Yes, things are beginning – a wee little bit – to loosen up. But we're still in this surreal world of Covid-19. Some days I do think it's all just a bad dream: I'm going to wake up and none of this will have been real. But it has been one LONG bad dream, if that were the case.

How are you doing through all of this?

One of the silver linings has been the opportunity to connect and reconnect with some people. Way back in 1983-1984 I attended a one-year leadership/discipleship programme called the Baptist Leadership Training School in Calgary (BLTS). There were 75 of us, all in our late teens and early 20's, from across Canada. We all had stars in our eyes, dreams in our hearts, and the world was our oyster. Most of us wanted to be architects for some strange reason, we were going to hike the West Coast Trail, travel around the world ...

We had our first ever reunion – a Zoom reunion – a couple of weeks ago. We're still scattered across Canada, and now overseas as well, from South Korea to England. Chances are this reunion would never have happened without Covid-19.

It's interesting reconnecting with people from 36 years ago.

As I have been reflecting on Scripture – in particular, 1 Thessalonians, which we are working through these days – and opportunities to reconnect – like my online reunion, the two have come together for me ...

Life has its moments

As we read a few weeks ago, life as a follower of Jesus in Thessalonica was not easy. In Acts 17, we read that after only 3 weeks in the city, Paul and the first believers were in trouble. The Jewish leaders hired a rent-a-mob – "*certain lewd fellows of the baser sort*" – to stamp out the new church and drive Paul and Silas from town. If you read on in Acts 17, Paul and Silas do leave, walking 75 kms to Berea (the equivalent of walking from Lethbridge almost to Claresholm or Grassy Lake). "*But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too*" – walking 75 kms each way! – "*agitating the crowds and stirring them up*" (17:13). These folks were nasty!

In today's reading, Paul comments that the believers in Thessalonica have "*become imitators*

of God's churches in Judea (Israel)." How so? *"You suffer from your own people the same things those churches suffer from the Jews"* (2:14). Just as the Jews were persecuting followers of Jesus in Israel/Judea, the believers in Thessalonica were being persecuted and abused by people – Jewish and non-Jewish – in their hometown, too.

More than that, Paul wants to come and see them to encourage them. He writes, *"out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but Satan blocked our way"* (2:17-18). How exactly "Satan blocked their way" Paul does not specify. But we have all had experiences where we really, really wanted to go somewhere or do something and obstacle after obstacle came along ...

Some people give the impression that following Jesus is all sunshine, roses, and walks in the park. These folks suggest that if you believe in Jesus, you will be healthy, wealthy, successful, and life will be wonderful.

That wasn't the experience of the Thessalonian Christians.

And, catching up with people after 36 years, that hasn't been our experience either. We have all had struggles:

- some struggled just finding meaning and purpose in life
- some have serious health challenges
- some wrestle with mental health issues
- some have been or are going through challenges with relationships
- some are struggling with employment
- some have had serious accidents
- at least two have died

Our reunion was crash course in real life. As we shared our stories, it was clear that there have been a lot of "interesting" experiences along the way. We have all been through some pretty hard times. But also some wonderful times. Some very stressful times. And some joyful times. Some of us are now in pretty good places, some are not. Some are still struggling through major challenges ...

Life happens. Sometimes as we expect. Sometimes unexpectedly. For instance, 36 years ago, I NEVER intended (or wanted) to be a pastor – but here I am. I was founder of the "Bearded-Buddies Club" – but here I am. I was a charter member of the "Bachelors-to-the-Rapture Club" – and here I am. I never really even knew Lethbridge existed – but here I am. I certainly never expected to live with chronic pain for over half my life – but here I am.

Life happens. It is happening to us right now. Some day we're all going to look back and say, "Remember 2020, the year of the virus ..." And we'll tell stories. Stories of loneliness. Stories of fear. Stories of hardship. And stories of heroism. And learning new skills. And reconnection. And joy. What are our stories going to be?

Life happens. Some things will just happen to us. We can't change those stories. Lining up

at Costco just happens. I can't change that. Not getting together physically with friends and family just happens. I can't change that.

But I can choose how I will respond when life happens. I can choose to allow my circumstances to lead to a downward spiral. Or I can choose to follow Paul's advice in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17: *"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."* I can choose joy. I can choose to pray. I can choose to be thankful and count my blessings.

What matters most

Life happens. It is happening to us right now. One thing Covid-19 is doing is it's forcing us to look at our lives and takes stock of what the real priorities in our lives are.

Paul longs to see his friends again. As we read a few minutes ago, Paul writes, *"Out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but Satan blocked our way"* (2:17-18). He goes on: *"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"* (2:19-20). Paul really, really, really like his friends in Thessalonica. Isn't that awesome?

As we reconnected after 36 years, it was clear that some of the greatest sources of joy – and in some cases sorrow – were relationships with people. It's interesting that no-one talked about their investment portfolio, their home, their car, their vacations, or their retirement plans. I certainly didn't. They didn't talk about their RVs or their boats or their super large screen TVs (which I don't have 😊).

People talked about their families. They talked about close friends. They talked about the people that mattered to them.

In most cases, these relationships were sources of incredible joy and – healthy – pride. In a few cases, where things had gone differently, these relationships have also been really hard. But inevitably they helped shape us into better, stronger, more resilient people.

Paul repeatedly praises the Thessalonians for their steadfast faith in Jesus, despite the challenges that comes with it. *"We thank God continually,"* Paul writes, *"because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe"* (2:13).

With our online reunion, we found what also matters most to many of us is our faith in Jesus. Despite the fact that life has not necessarily always turned out as we might have planned – or hoped – we have found that our faith in Jesus has seen – and is seeing – us through the challenges. It's not that our faith in Jesus has prevented bad things from happening to good people; it IS that Jesus has helped us get through those dark valleys.

In particular, in verse 13, Paul focuses on the formative power of the Word of God, Scripture.

When we're facing tough times – when it's hard to *rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances* – when prayer seems difficult or seems to end at the ceiling, when giving thanks seems almost impossible because things seem so overwhelming, when joy seems irrelevant because life is so hard – then I find I need to turn to Scripture.

There is something about the tangible-ness, the timelessness, and the solidness of Scripture that I need when times get tough. The Word of God is like a firm foundation that, when things like joy, and prayer, and thanksgiving seem elusive, can ground my faith in the rock-solid truth of God. For me, personally, I often turn to the psalms: familiar psalms like Psalm 23 and 121, and others like Psalm 19, Psalm 96, Psalm 139, and Psalm 148.

The other passage I often turn to is Romans 8:31-39

"If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

When times get tough, the tough know people matter. Jesus, when asked what the greatest command is, actually quotes two. One is about people: *"Love your neighbour as yourself."* May we build stronger and stranger relationships these days.

When times get tough, the tough, most importantly, turn to God. In my yearbook from 1983-1984, I ended my little bio with the other command Jesus says is most important: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."* That verse, that Word of God, has continue to define my life for the past 36 years. May it be true of all of us. May we love God with all of our being.

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