

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³ May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (1 Thessalonians 3:9-13)

What's Lacking in our Faith?

“I’m a much better Christian than you are.” When I was a student at the seminary, the sister of one my roommates said that to him and his brothers. When he told me about it, he wasn’t exactly complimentary. In fact, it was one of those moments that they will probably never let her forget. I wasn’t there when she said it so it’s hard to know what her point was. But it sounded like she was a little full of herself and like she was insulting their faith. How would we react to such a statement? And if we would be insulted, would we be equally insulted by what St. Paul said to the Thessalonians in the word of God before us today? He said that he wanted to come to supply what was lacking in their faith. What would we think if the president of the synod wrote us a letter like that? St. Paul was writing to a specific congregation with a specific situation in mind, but it’s also true that this letter is written for us, so that we can learn from its message. That forces us to swallow our pride and ask a tough question: **what’s lacking in our faith?**

I.

When he wrote to the Thessalonians, Paul said, **“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.”** That tells us what Paul thought was lacking: love. When we understand what he meant, we’ll understand that this does apply to us as well. **What’s lacking in our faith? Love – may God increase it!**

Now, to understand Paul’s words, you have to know a little about the situation. The congregation in Thessalonica was very young. Paul himself had founded it. When he first went to that city, many people believed his message. But the Jewish inhabitants were jealous and they organized a persecution. Paul and eventually the other missionaries had to leave. But the members didn’t have that option. They had to live in that city where they were going to get grief every day for their faith. Paul was worried that without spiritual leadership such new Christians would lose their faith. So he sent Timothy back to check on them and encourage them. When Timothy returned, he gave a glowing report: the Christians in Thessalonica remembered their work with great joy. They were faithful to the Lord and they longed to see Paul again. Now, they did have some doctrinal questions and Paul wrote them two letters to clear things up. But they were standing firm.

So Paul wrote, **“How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?”** He was not talking down to them. Paul loved these people and he treasured their faith. Then he said, **“Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.”** Because he loved them, he wanted to come back and give them what was lacking in their faith.

How do you understand the word “lacking”? To me, it’s a negative word. It implies falling short. I’m not sure it’s the best way to translate what Paul said. The Greek word he used really means to complete something that isn’t finished yet. That was a fair statement for a congregation that had only a brief ministry before the missionaries were forced to leave. It was not a letter from some self-important official who looked down on those dumb members. It was a letter of deep love from a shepherd who knew that his flock still had areas that they needed to grow in.

One of the areas that Paul wanted to address was love. He wanted God to make their love increase and overflow to each other and to everyone else. Now, he did not say that they had no love or that their love was a disappointment. Rather, he wanted it to grow and overflow. He wanted their lives to be dramatic evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit. He wanted them to do more than just feel good about each other. He wanted them to overflow in serving each other. That’s what Christian love is: serving each other. It’s putting myself in last place and bending over backwards for the good of the people God has put into my life. Paul wanted that

congregation to be a place where the members constantly looked for ways to help each other, to be a place where pride and selfishness did not exist and where every action asked, “How can I serve my brothers here and everywhere else?”

My friends, do we need to grow in love like that church did? You tell me. Christian love means that what I want does not matter. What matters is what the person next to me needs. Christian love means that I never grouse or complain about someone else and that I never stomp off in a huff. Christian love means that every decision we make is about what’s best for our members and when I don’t get what I want, I rejoice that we’re still serving God and I commit myself to working with all my might so that the gospel is preached and our work goes forward. Do we love like that? Or is there something incomplete in our faith?

Every church that I’ve ever served – every church that I have been a member of or even visited – needed to grow in love because every Christian church on this planet is made up of sinners. What’s the heart of sin? It’s selfishness. It’s changing love from something that looks away from me to something that only cares about me. Every member of every congregation is born a selfish sinner. We Christians still have that selfish sinner inside us fighting all efforts to love others and insisting that we love ourselves first of all. We all know how successful he is. We all know how hard it is for us to turn away from selfish pride and serve the people around us. It’s hard to do that for our own families. It’s even harder to do it for people at church, people we only see occasionally during the week. It’s almost impossible for us to do it for people we barely know out there.

We were all born selfish. But God intervened to change us. He sent Jesus to be the one selfless person who ever lived. Jesus cared nothing about himself. He fed thousands of people with a little boy’s lunch, but he refused to turn stones into bread for himself when he hadn’t eaten for over a month. He healed and cast out demons and raised the dead. But when whips ripped open his flesh, when Roman soldiers drove nails through his hands and feet and hung him on a cross, he did nothing to heal himself or to ease his own pain. When his Father in heaven abandoned on the cross and made him suffer hell there, Jesus stayed on that cross and he suffered it until he could cry, “It is finished!” and die. That perfect love of Christ wipes away all record of our selfishness. That perfect love of Christ makes us perfect and holy in God’s sight.

When God brought us the good news of that perfect love, he changed us. He put a new believer in our heart who is totally selfless. That new believer loves God and loves the people around him. He does everything for them. But while we live here, the old unbeliever is still there, fighting the new believer every step of the way. That’s why our faith is lacking. That’s why it’s incomplete and still needs to be built up.

That’s why God still comes to us in the gospel. Because Paul did not say, “I want to make your love overflow.” He said, “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow.” Only God can lead us to put aside the selfishness we were born with and love one another. Only God can make this congregation a place where love overflows in our service to each other. How does God do that? He comes to us when I announce that your sins are forgiven. He comes to us through body and blood of Christ in communion. He comes to us in the waters of baptism and in the promise he made to us there. He comes to us in the gospel in our sermons and hymns and liturgies, in the gospel our teachers proclaim in our classrooms – and in the gospel in the words that we share with one another as we love and forgive and encourage each another. He comes to us and he changes us. The love and forgiveness of God make our hearts different. They lift up the new man, the new believer and give him power to love.

II.

Now we can understand the other part of what Paul wanted for the Thessalonians. He said, “**May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.**” What does it mean to have your hearts strengthened so that you’re blameless on Judgment Day? Our hearts are the place where our faith lives. The Bible speaks of faith as having a new heart. Paul is asking that they have faith that is so strong that on Judgment Day they will be judged to be holy. What he says applies to all Christians. **What’s lacking in our faith? Maturity – may God strengthen us.**

Is Paul saying that the stronger our faith is, the more blameless we are in God’s sight? Is he saying that people with a stronger faith are more holy? That they’re less guilty than other people? NO! Faith is the hand that grasps the promises God gives us. In one of my previous congregations, when I was shaking hands after a Christmas service, a member left a folded-up a twenty dollar bill in my hand when he shook it. Now, if I didn’t have a hand for him to shake, I couldn’t have held on to his gift. God creates faith in our hearts as the hand that

he can put eternal life in. That hand grasps the holiness Jesus won for us on the cross. Without that hand, I could not hold on to Jesus. Without God working through the gospel, I could not have that hand.

Paul is talking to people who already have that hand of faith. And he's thinking of all the ways that the devil tries to weaken and even cut that hand cut off. The Thessalonians had already experienced persecution. They were cut off from their missionaries. The devil wanted to make them afraid and confused so that they'd lose their way. He does the exact same things to us. Every day, he tries to weaken that hand that grasps God's promises. He tries to cut it off so that we no longer hang on to the work Jesus did for us. Without that work, we can't be blameless and holy on Judgment Day. Without Jesus, God will send us to hell – which is the devil's only joy.

So in every sickness and hardship, in every disturbing news report, in every moment of laziness that keeps us from coming and hearing God's word, in every moment of weakness when we give in to temptation, the devil is working to cut off that hand of faith. But even when our hand of faith is so cut and wounded that it seems like it's going to have to let go, Jesus is still our Savior. He still comes to us in the gospel and heals that hand. That's what happens every time you come here. God heals that hand of faith. God makes it stronger so that it hangs on to his promise that on Judgment Day he will find that you were perfect, because Jesus was.

That promise comes from the one who loved us so much that he sent his own Son to die and rise for us. He will keep our faith alive through his gospel. In fact, every cut that the devil lands on our hand of faith reminds us that we can't protect that hand, we can't strengthen that hand, we can't grab onto the promises of God by our own power. But it's not our power that strengthens the hand of faith. God works for us. When we're weakest, that's when we cling to him, because that's when we know that only he can save us.

He will save us. He will come to us through these gospel promises and he will carry us to eternal life. But he does ask one thing of us: that we hear the promises. That we come to communion. That we remember our baptism. That we confess our sins and hear his forgiveness. That we return to his word over and over again and see our Savior there living and dying and rising for us. He promises that he will work through that gospel and make our congregation a place of faith, a place full of people who will be blameless and holy when our Lord returns.

No one is looking down on us. God is simply speaking the truth to us, frankly and with love. We need to grow in our faith. That will be true for us as long as we live here. As long as we live here, his gospel will make that growth happen. Come and hear that word! Amen.