

4-14-24

## **Not a Failure**

### **1 Thessalonians 2**

As most of you know by now, I'm a parent of five kids. I use the term kids instead of children because they're not all children anymore. My oldest being almost 23.

Sometimes Julie and I joke that we're going to write a book together about parenting, but I always tell her that it would never work. Our views on parenting don't always line up, and I don't think we'd be able to agree on the title of the book, let alone the topic of the first chapter!

I'm reminded of the story about how two separate contractors were hired to build the same tunnel. Each contractor was to start at an opposite end. Well, you can imagine what happened. As they approached the midway point, they realized that the tunnel was not going to line up properly, and they'd have to do some creative engineering to finish the project.

Maybe this is how it is with parenting. Each parent has to do some creative engineering to complete the project and get the child to adulthood!

One thing I've learned as a parent is that children always have lots of questions even if they don't necessarily ask them out loud. Don't get me wrong, my kids are always asking me questions, but even if they don't ask me, I know they're thinking them! And one of the big questions they're always asking or at least thinking is ...

"Am I okay?" "Am I a success?" "Do I have the capacity to navigate life?"

To put it in a negative sense, the question might be ... "Am I a failure?"

I know that sounds pretty harsh, but kids ask these questions all the time, maybe not directly, but indirectly.

They ask it in subtle ways like when the daughter asks, "Do you like my outfit?" or the son says, Daddy, "Watch this new trick I came up with."

For example, not long ago, I was out in the yard pitching baseballs to one of my kids. They had a bat in hand and were attempting to hit the ball. They wiffed on a number of tries before finally making contact and the first thing out of their mouth wasn't, Hey, I hit the ball! It was ...

"See daddy! I'm not a failure!"

So, young people have a tremendous drive to succeed in life. Parents also want their children to succeed in life. Even adults themselves want to succeed. But what does this success look like?

It's interesting to note that after Paul's introductory statement that was brimming over with glowing reports – so positive and encouraging that his next statement was about failure. *"You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure."*

Of course it wasn't, Paul. It was a smashing success. Why, all of sudden, are you toning down your enthusiasm by saying something like ... Well, at least it wasn't an epic fail.

(This is how kids talk these days.)

Teenagers sometimes use this playing down tactic. They may go and have a blast at Cedar Point or maybe they had the time of their life at summer camp, but when they return and their parents ask them if they had a good time, they respond with something like ... "It was okay, but I thought the scrambled eggs were too soggy."

So why did Paul do that? Why was he suddenly tempering his enthusiasm about his trip to Thessalonica? Well, I think the answer is pretty obvious.

All we have to do is go back into Acts 17. Remember that Paul and his companions had to leave Thessalonica rather abruptly because of the unruly mob that had formed in opposition to their message.

*Acts 17:5: "But the Jews were jealous; so, they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city."*

Now you'd think that with the missionaries packing up and leaving, that this would have quelled the hostility, but it didn't.

In fact, Luke continues in Acts 17: *"When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God in Berea", the next town over, "they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up" forcing Paul to move again.*

Here's my point: If Paul's enemies had enough gumption and vitriol to follow him from town to town to instigate even more trouble for him there, what makes you think that they would stop their bullying back at home?

I'm sure there were plenty of trouble-makers retained in Thessalonica to carry on the dirty work, leaving the new believers wondering what they had gotten themselves into.

No doubt, this continued opposition began raising doubts in their minds. After all, Paul's visit had been a brief one, and though he'd moved on, the jealous Jews remained, opposing the Gospel and smearing Paul's good name.

Let this be a lesson to us all: Just because a person becomes a Christian doesn't mean that Satan stops attacking. On the contrary, his attacks only ratchet up and he adjusts his strategy.

If Satan's primary goal is to prevent a person from becoming a Christian, then his secondary goal would be to render a Christian ineffective and weak if they do happen to turn to God.

So, this gives us some clue as to why Paul wants to reassure the Thessalonians by emphatically stating that his visit was not a failure:

I had to leave you and yet, you're still being buffeted by the enemy. They're telling all sorts of lies and terrible things about me now – me, who brought you the Good News! And if they can somehow succeed in delegitimizing me and discrediting me before you, then they'll think they have you right where they want you – doubting, disbelieving, and rejecting the message I brought to you – the message you know in your hearts to be true.

So, though it appears my visit is being counted as a loss because of their lying and cheating, don't buy into their lame arguments!

Don't let them win!

When you think about it, a lot of this stuff is still happening today. We see in politics and in other avenues of life. If you can't argue against the principle of the thing, then do the next best thing:

Attack the messenger or try to delegitimize the process.

Look at the tactics that were conducted by those who opposed certain Supreme court nominations. They didn't try to argue that they were underqualified. Instead, they tried to destroy the person's character and reputation or delegitimize the entire selection process by calling it a sham.

When you have no leg to stand on, the only thing you can do is get down and dirty.

So, Paul makes his own argument, not to bolster his own reputation, mind you, but to remind the Thessalonians that the Gospel they came to believe in is in fact true. And how can they know beyond a shadow of a doubt?

Paul gives three reasons, though they all fall under one broad category: **Because Paul and his companions lived out the Gospel before them!**

Paul already started this argument in chapter 1 when he wrote, "*You know how we lived among for your sake*", but he elaborates in chapter 2:

- "*We dared to tell you his Gospel in spite strong opposition.*" This goes back to chapter 1 when Paul wrote that the Gospel came to the Thessalonians with power, with the holy spirit and with **deep conviction.**

The deep conviction was demonstrated in the lives of Paul and his associates in their refusal to turn away in the face of great opposition.

Tell me it's not true that when you see someone stand up for something that they believe in, despite opposition, you take notice. Now, I'm not saying that their stand necessarily makes their belief true, but it does cause us to stop and ponder their cause.

Remember Colin Kapernick?

You may have completely disagreed with his political stance when he started kneeling during the National Anthem, but you can't deny his courage for taking a stance. The world took notice.

- Second, Paul reminds the new believers that the message they received was neither erroneous nor tangled up in ulterior or nefarious motives.

He even makes a point to say that he didn't use trickery.

Interestingly, the Greek word that is used to translate trick was originally used to describe a lure to catch fish. Paul didn't dangle before his hearers some tantalizing bait that would turn out to be a trap. His message was authentic.

There was nothing fishy in Paul's message. It was straight forward and to the point: The Son of God came to rescue sinners by dying on the cross and He showed that his plan can and will work by being raised from the dead.

Paul never tried to conceal an ulterior motive like greed, and he never attempted to reel people in using flattery or falseness.

Instead, he carried out his mission honestly with the sole purpose to please God and not men.

- Third – and this is the argument that he uses to hit the homerun and drive home the point that the Thessalonians could have 100% assurance that they were believing in the right thing:

Paul reminds them of who raised them – who were their spiritual parents. He evokes the examples of a mother and a father to bring home the point that the Gospel that so many are trying to destroy is in fact everything it proclaims to be:

We were like a mother to you, Paul writes, caring for you, nurturing you, delighting in you, investing in you, sacrificing for you, working day and night for you so that you would not only

hear the Gospel from our lips, but see it lived out before you in our lives.

We were like a father, Paul continues, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God.

This is the success I was talking about earlier.

Success in God's kingdom has to do with us being faithful, honorable, loving citizens in his kingdom, and living lives sacrificially in a way that reflects God's goodness and nature.

This is what it means to be called *"into his kingdom and glory."*

This is what it means to be successful and not a failure, in God's eyes.

I want to conclude this message by highlighting something Paul wrote that we cannot afford to miss if we want to be a people and a church that live lives worthy of God's calling, and that's Paul's description of God's word, as it pertains to its source and nature.

Paul writes in verse 13, *"You received the word of God and accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe."*

In other words, consider the source.

Anytime we make a judgement call about something, which we do daily, by the way, we are to consider the source. Jesus said in John 7:24, *"Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgement."*

I'm reminded of the ongoing battle in America that concerns censorship.

Basically, it comes down to the idea that a few powerful people think they have the right and authority to determine for us, the general public, what source is valid and what is invalid. What is legitimate and what is illegitimate. They do so under the guise of a so-called noble cause, saying that they're trying to protect us from harmful information, when in fact they do it to promote their own agenda while silencing views that are contrary to their own.

It's hard to make the right judgement when certain information is concealed and withheld from us, but that's the world we live in right now, and it's going to get worse before it gets better. I'm sure you already know this.

This is why it's so important to remember that God's word is exactly what it claims to be: truth and light and life itself.

Remember Peter's response to Jesus when he asked his disciples...

*"Do you want to leave too?"* What did he say?

*"Lord, to whom shall we go?"* You have the words of eternal life."

So, consider the source, and then make a right judgement, not based on what you want to be right, but what you know to be right.

Second, God's word is *"at work within you who believe."*

Where do you think your belief in God came from in the first place?

Did it come from looking up at the stars and pondering your own insignificance in the universe?

Did it come from your parents who made a point of dragging you to church every Sunday when you were between the ages of 5 and 13?



Was it that tragedy in your life that hit so close to home that it brought you to your knees and caused you to cry out to God for help?

Whatever it was that specifically caused you to consider God and even seek him and hunger and thirst for him, behind that event or events is God's word.

Nothing happens in the universe unless God ordains it to be so.

This is why Paul's visit to Thessalonica was not a failure, even if he did get run out of town and face even greater persecution.

This is why this church is not a failure even if there's room for 4 times the number of people that show up here on a given Sunday.

This is why you're not a failure even if you wake up in the morning with Satan whispering in your ear that you might as well stay in bed because you can't and won't make a difference.

You're not a failure, because God's word is working in you, and it's going to keep working in you without failure because He never fails.

We learn in the very first chapter of the Bible that God brought his thoughts into reality just by speaking them. Moses wrote, *"And God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light."*

And God says to us today – more than that – promises us that whatever He says will ultimately come to pass. Ezekiel 12:28: *"Whatever I say will be fulfilled, declares the Sovereign Lord."*

Paul writes in the beginning of Philippians, *"He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."*

So, with Christ and His word in our hearts, the only thing we can possibly fail at now is being a failure! It's no longer an option for a Christian, because our lives, our success, and our future is now completely wrapped up in Him, our Victorious King and Savior! Amen!