

Boastworthy Believers • II Thessalonians 1:1–4

Boasting is bad, or at least that is what we usually think. We consider it to be socially unacceptable, perhaps boorish, for someone to say how great he is, how much money he makes, how important his job is or what connections and friendships he may have.

What is true in our society was pretty much the same in the first century. That is why the Apostle Paul was reluctant to brag about the churches he had founded. It might sound as if he was taking the credit and that just wasn't the way things were done. But then along came those Thessalonians and he thought them so terrific that he found that he had to boast. He was so thankful for them and so proud of them. As he spoke to other churches he just had to tell them how great the Thessalonians were.

How do you think we compare to those Thessalonians? Would we also be classified as “boastworthy believers?” Are we sufficiently terrific in our Christian lives that he could brag about us to other churches? If not, shouldn't our goal and desire be to be the kind of Christians that are, at least to some extent, elevated as models to other people?

In II Thessalonians 1:1-4 are found three characteristics of “boastworthy believers.” It was written no more than six months after the writing of the first letter to the Thessalonians, also written in A.D. 51.

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is in-

creasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials that you are enduring.

The first characteristic is growing faith. Paul boasts that the Thessalonians have faith that is “growing more and more.” But did you know that it was not always that way? There was a time when they had no faith at all. They weren't even Christians!

Paul reflects upon it in his first letter. In I Thessalonians 1:6, 9-10 he wrote to them saying that there was a day when “*you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit . . . you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*”

There is a very important truth here. At one point in time the Thessalonians were not believers and at another point in time they were. The implication is that we cannot grow faith until we have faith. Imagine trying to grow vegetables in a garden that has not first been seeded. It would be an exercise in futility to go out to the garden every day and water and fertilize and chase the rabbits away in the hope of growing carrots, if you had never planted a seed. In order for something to grow, it must first begin.

The same goes for faith. Unless someone first becomes a Christian, there is no faith to grow. Many people in America are fooled into thinking that they are Christians simply because they have been born in a Christian country. That is like thinking that you are a car because you're in a garage! Becoming a Christian is based on personal faith. It is believing in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. You have to do it yourself!

Maybe you can point back to some calendar date and say, “That is the time when I, like the Thessalonians, received the message with joy. The day before I could not be counted as a believer, but on that day I came to faith in Jesus Christ.” And yet, perhaps you really cannot say that. There is no point

in talking about growing faith if, in fact, there is not initial faith. It is to you that I give the invitation to begin today to make that relational transaction with God. Receive Jesus Christ

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as Savior and begin a life journey with him that lasts for all of eternity. You can do it right now! Privately talk to God and make the exchange of faith. Give your life to God; accept Jesus as your Savior. Remember, there must be a beginning in order for faith to grow.

When some people become Christians, they grow quickly like the beanstalk in the children's story. The seed of faith germinates and sprouts with great

vigor and wonder. Then sometimes there is a stall and growth plateaus, or maybe even decreases. Instead of a growing faith, it is a shrinking faith.

That is apparently the way it was for at least some of those Thessalonians. Paul worried about them. In his first letter he sensed that something was missing and their faith was not growing as it should grow. He wrote, “*Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith*” (I Thess. 3:10).

Have you had a car that stalled occasionally? Then you know some of the frustration of driving it. Some years ago our family had a Ford stationwagon that I think ought be in the Guinness book of records for stalling out. It stalled out on an average of once every mile on a trip from New Jersey to Colorado – that’s about 2,000 stalls! I think we went to every Ford dealership between the East Coast and the Rocky Mountains but they never could find out what was the matter with the car. But something was lacking.

Some Christians are like that Ford. Something’s lacking and they stall all the time. One minute they believe and the next they don’t. It is difficult to grow where there is a constant uncertainty and irregularity to Christian faith.

Paul’s prayer in his first letter to the Thessalonians was answered by the time he wrote his second letter to them. That is why I believe it was with great delight that he wrote, “...*your faith is growing more and more.*” It makes me want to figure out how that change took place. How did those who were not believers, who became believers and were then stalling out, get to the point where Paul described them as “boastworthy Christians” who were growing more and more?

It seems to me that there are two divinely given factors here: one is circumstance and the other is choice. God gets our faith growing through circumstances and choices. He initiates or allows a multitude of circumstances in our lives, each of which precipitates a choice of whether to trust God or not. Those circumstances come in every color, shape and size. For some, it is ill health. For others it may be depression, job loss or unpaid bills. Some experience one long and protracted crisis while others experience a whole series, one crisis after another. But every one of these circumstances gives us the choice of either dealing with them in our own sputtering resources or in faith, by trusting in God in a way that we have not previously trusted him. And when we trust him, then we become the kind of “boastworthy believers” who are growing in faith.

In the basement of our house there is a board with a series of pencil marks — lines with names and dates. It is the growth chart for the family who once lived in what is now our house. While we have painted and papered over just about every surface of the house, inside and out, we have left that board alone, even though we don’t know the people. It is an intriguing thing to look at for some of the lines are so close together that they are almost on top of each other. I suspect there was a child who insisted on asking, “Have I grown?” and another line was drawn, even when there wasn’t much change. Other lines are really quite far apart, even though some of the dates are quite close — indicating a significant growth spurt.

We all agree that height is measurable, but may doubt that faith is measurable. Yet the Apostle Paul apparently thought that over a six-month period it was possible to measure an increase in faith. He was able to look back earlier in A.D. 51 and see where the Thessalonians were and then look again six months later and see where they had come. That challenges me to say that we ought also make a comparison in the growth in our faith over the last six months or year.

What would your faith growth chart look like? Are you growing in your trust in God? If yes, add your name to the names of those terrific Thessalonians. If not, make the choice to grow in faith, regardless of the circumstances. It is that kind of growing faith that makes for a “boastworthy believer.”

The second characteristic of a “boastworthy believer” is increasing love. Just as Paul was concerned earlier about the Thessalonians’ faith, he was also concerned about their love. Faith and love are the twin ingredients for the identification of Christians. If we have neither faith nor love, then we can’t say that we are followers of Jesus Christ.

In his first letter Paul had prayed, “*May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else*” (I Thess. 3:12). Again he was measuring where they were. The Thessalonians were very new Christians. They had had only a few weeks of instruction in the Christian faith. I sense that there were measures of love, but inadequacy too, in the love they expressed to each other. I know there were doctrinal differences within the church, particularly over the timing and the character of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. As a result of that, some had quit their jobs and sold their homes and were waiting outside for Jesus Christ to come back. That had created

tension because they had run out of money and others in the church had to go to work and provide the money for those who refused to work. And then, of course, there were the inevitable differences that come whenever you put people together. But when Paul observed all of the interpersonal relationships, he came to the conclusion that they needed to increase their love for each other and for everyone else. So my guess is that there were some people in the church of Thessalonica who were kind and some who were rather grumpy. Some were gracious and built up the others and some put others down. Some were forgiving and others held grudges. Love was there but it needed to grow.

Six months later there was marked improvement and he writes to them again saying, “*the love every one of you has for each other is increasing*” (II Thess. 1:3). Not that they had arrived, for their love was far from perfect, but they had increased in love. There was measurable and observable change.

What I find particularly exciting is that love is characterized as belonging to every one of them. Every single believer in that church in Thessalonica had increased in love! You know that Paul had to be thinking of certain individuals. Perhaps there was a woman who always held grudges who decided to forgive whether or not she was asked. There might have been two men who wouldn’t talk to each other, who had gotten into some type of relational deadlock, but somehow in that sixth month period there was an increase in love so that one of them took the first step, risking rejection, and broke the deadlock. Or maybe there were families who were at odds with each other who started getting along or people who were in debt to each other made strides to start paying it back. It was enough to make Paul look at them all and say, “You are increasing in love.” It was something worth boasting about.

And how about us? Are we the kind of boastworthy believers who are increasing in love? I’m not suggesting perfection for I know myself and others too well to even hint at it. But I can take delight in the real possibility that we can increase in love in those simple areas: forgiveness, paying back money, helping someone out financially and building relationships between people. We can do it, every single one of us, so that six months from now, if Saint Paul or any other outside observer were to look at our lives and measurement could be made, it could

be clearly boasted that these people, because of Jesus Christ, had increased in their love.

A third characteristic of boastworthy believers in verse four of II Thessalonians is ongoing perseverance. This spiritual growth wasn’t taking place in easy times. These people in Thessalonica were really up against it with persecutions and trials. Their growing faith and increasing love was against a backdrop of severe difficulty.

Maybe that is not surprising at all. For do you not find in your own walk with Jesus Christ that when things go well there seems to be a time of spiritual plateau, but when problems come we are more likely to increase our faith? These people were under persecution. The Greek word Paul uses actually means an external attack.

Historians tell us that Thessalonica became one of the leading cities for persecution against believers. The governor ordered worship of Caesar. The Christians said that they had only one God and they could not worship anyone in the pagan pantheon nor could they worship a living man such as Caesar. And so they refused. Then someone concocted the idea of

dedicating wine in the pagan temples either to Caesar or to Venus and then bringing that wine to the marketplace and sprinkling it on all of

the produce, claiming it was dedicated to Caesar or Venus. Then the Christians couldn’t buy food, or at least had to make their choice to bend their knee to some pagan God. Their difficulties increased until they couldn’t get jobs or ply their own trades. Later, it was at Thessalonica that Christians were burned and crucified.

While we may not face that kind of persecution, some of us may be discriminated against in our jobs, schools and family because of our stand for Jesus Christ. There may be a lack of promotion, a setback in sales or extraordinary stress in your family simply because of your faith in Jesus Christ. We need to remember that when the Thessalonian Christians were persecuted, they grew in their faith and increased in their love. Tough times can be growth times.

There is another side to the difficulties they faced. II Thessalonians 1:4 states that the persecutions were accompanied by trials. While persecution is external, trials are the everyday pressures they had to face. Trials are much more like what we face. They are ill health, underemployment, cars that won’t start, plumbing that leaks, unpaid bills or any one of the

Tough times can be growth times.

ongoing hassles that everyone faces.

The Christians in Thessalonica faced trials just as we do and yet they grew in faith and increased in love. They may have had severe persecution on the outside and been pressed in by all kinds of trials, but the amazing evidence of God's presence in them is the way they responded on the inside — with perseverance and faith. Even when all of these problems existed, they didn't quit. The particular Greek word that Paul uses that is translated "perseverance" means more than survival or just hanging in there. It's a more positive response — a creative response — it's saying that even though the adversity might be great, the trust will be greater so that one can grow spiritually through the tough times.

I want to be very careful here. I don't want to participate in the glib tendency to say, "Hey, I know you're really up against the wall with tough things in life, but just look at the positive side. The Christian way is to rise above the problem" and then walk away. To do that is a disservice. Seldom does that kind of advice change how anyone copes with the persecutions or trials of life. All it does is add guilt to your misery. What we're talking about here is a revolutionary perspective on life. It is the deep-rooted faith that God uses even evil for good. It is a perspective that genuinely trusts God through the worst of times, and that trusting of God is what then precipitates the growth in faith and the increase in love.

Warren Wiersbe says, "God never wastes suffering." I like that . . . and I believe that. God never wastes persecution, trials, hassles or problems, but he always uses them for good in our lives. When we have that perspective, then we can also have the type of perseverance and faith that can creatively and positively respond to the difficulties that we are up against.

I read an article in Christianity Today that gave an analogy that I like. It started out by quoting Einstein as saying, "God doesn't play dice," but then the author added, "God does play chess." That is, God, like a skilled chess player, has a long-range strategy. It is not the roll of the dice or things happening by chance that rule our lives. God is looking three, four, five or seven moves ahead with a strategy for winning the game. The current move may entail a significant and perhaps painful loss of a piece or a position on the board, but it is part of God's brilliant strategy for ultimate victory. God is the one whom Scripture describes as being able to work all things together for good for those who love him, those who are called according to his purpose. He is the God who will not be stalemated. He will not be check-

mated. He will not lose.

When I read the opening words of Paul's second letter to Thessalonica, do you know who I think about? I think about you. I have no difficulty boasting about your growing faith, your increasing love and your ongoing perseverance. But I'm not sure I can say "everyone." It worries me a little when we talk about boastworthy believers and Paul used the word "everyone." My concern is that perhaps not everyone could be described as growing in faith, increasing in love and ongoing perseverance. So that becomes my prayer and my dream.

Maybe you need to get started — to believe and to accept Jesus as Savior. If so, do it today, don't wait another day! Get that seed of faith planted so it can grow. Or maybe you need to just get growing. Maybe you've been a Christian for a long time but have stalled out. Decide today, make the choice to grow in faith. Or, maybe you need to increase in love. You can start right this moment. Think of the person, circumstance or situation where love needs to be evidenced and decide to do it. Maybe you need to persevere in tough times as those Thessalonians did. In faith, adopt the perspective that God will not be stalemated or checkmated. Believe that he is able to take even the loss of yesterday's piece or today's position on the board of your life and strategize six or ten moves ahead in the game for victory and for good.

May each of us be boastworthy believers: growing in faith, increasing in love and in perseverance.

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