

Study 4: The Endeavoring Ministry

Introduction:

Of the many ancient mythological stories with knowing, one of particular interest and relatability is that of Sisyphus. Sisyphus, according to the Greek myth, was a conniving and particularly sly king. After a life of trickery, Zeus punished Sisyphus with an eternal burden: He was to spend every moment until the end of forever rolling a boulder up a hill. The grand irony in this task is that there was no way Sisyphus could trick his way around the task. If he failed for even a second, the boulder would roll back down to the bottom of the hill and his progress would be lost. While this story seems particularly bleak, it does give us some expression of a common human experience of futility. At times, it seems like all of our efforts are worthless; That even the task itself is a punishment for something! We've had moments where we watch the boulder roll back down the hill as we throw our hands up and cry. Why is life so hard? And why does trying to do the right thing often make it harder?

This is often the experience of Christians. In fact, "often" might even be too soft a word for how common the feeling of futility is for those trying to follow Christ. It seems like the task is so colossal and we are so weak. Our opponents are numerous and strong, and our team usually looks like the third string of a high school football team. So how do we face opposition at all? In this section, Paul gives us the answer. In his endeavor to love and minister to the Thessalonians, a people beset with temptation and persecution, Paul shows how we deal with that boulder.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5

But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy. Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

Discussion:

1. Let's be honest: Paul had the tools to become a superstar. If he had wanted, he could have left all this difficulty at the doorstep and raked in some fame and fortune. Even with his intelligence and a powerful influence, Paul chose to suffer for Christ for the sake of the church. It ought to make us think about what is so compelling about the Gospel that Paul would volunteer to live like this. Paul had a lot to boast about in his old life, according to his letter to the Philippians (See Phil. 3:2-11), but he doesn't boast in those

things. Instead, he boasts here of the Thessalonians themselves! That they are his *glory* and his *joy*! Let's work to understand this together. **What experience of our own can we relate to this? What is your "glory and joy"? Why do you think Paul loves these people so much?**

Leader Notes: Help people think about where they put most of their time and effort, and what they really want to talk about when they meet new people. What excites us is often what we're most proud of. This is not necessarily negative or positive. It is not a bad thing to glory in our children; They are gifts from God! Neither is it bad to glory in our talents; Those are gifts too! But as soon as we point that glory towards ourselves and take credit for their beauty, it spoils the very beauty we celebrate. To truly glory in God, we have to be conscious of what His order for our life is. Paul's glory in these Thessalonians is clearly a great expression of love for our neighbor.

2. Think back to the boulder. The heavy weight of persecution and fear was set upon the Thessalonians' shoulders so that Paul needed to send Timothy to encourage them in their afflictions. What Paul reveals after this is a terrifying reality for some: Affliction is a part of our destiny. Many false gospels have been preached and almost all of them exclude this! For so many false teachers, the Christian destiny is Candyland: health, wealth, sugar, spice, and everything nice. "You might stub your toe or bump your elbow, but God mostly just wants you to be nice and comfy for your ride to heaven!" Paul and the other early Christians probably would have had some thoughts on this. The truth is virtually opposite: Suffering is a promise and endurance is a gift. **Why does a good God who loves his children allow them to suffer on earth? What is our hope amid suffering and persecution?**

Leader Notes: The Lord has given us this ministry not as an extra burden, but as a hope for those suffering. The reality of living in a fallen world is suffering for everyone. Suffering is the reality of a world alienated from the Lord. But the Gospel is our hope. It does not pluck us up out of the world (We are still human, after all), but does provide us the hope of knowing that this suffering will fade. Our hope is that Christ has won peace in eternity for us by becoming like us, facing human suffering, and rising from the dead. Focus on the Gospel here.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6-3:13

But now that 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—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. For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and

for all, as we do for you, 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.

Discussion

1. Thankfully, we learn that Timothy has returned with good news: The Thessalonians are still rolling the boulder and doing so with strength. This lifts a weight of Paul's heart, as any possibility that our loved ones are in danger is no easy burden to bear. One thing to note here is how shockingly relational the strength of the Thessalonians is. It would be one thing if Paul had just sent for a spiritual progress report. He could have checked a couple boxes, and the Thessalonians could have gone on their way. However, this strength was fortified by Paul's longing to see the Thessalonians and their longing to see Paul. We know a thing or two after 2020 about longing to see our brothers and sisters in Christ. **How does the community of the church strengthen the endurance of the church? How can we actively encourage those who are suffering in our church? How do you hope to be/wish you were encouraged by your church in a time of pain?**

Leader's Notes: We can strengthen each other through prayer, help (physical, emotional, financial, etc.), and encouragement through fellowship. As church members we should always be seeking those among us in pain so that we can help and encourage them. For the last two questions, open up discussion, as there are no wrong answers. We each have gifts we can use for building up the body, and we each know how we can best receive encouragement. Everyone is different both in our ability to help and receive help. One thing you can encourage your group to do is ask their friends how they best receive help as a unique individual.

2. The ultimate goal as seen in the final verses of this section is the increase in love and holiness of the Thessalonians. In time, this endurance and love produces further love and holiness. One phrase here stands out as especially beautiful: "establish your hearts blameless in holiness." The end of this section is the hope that we will stand perfect at the coming of Christ if we persist in faith through trial. **How does this reality bring you hope? In your own walk, what do you feel is lacking to this end? How can those in your small group love and support you as you seek to increase in love and holiness?**

Leader's Notes: Again, open this up for free discussion. As a leader, try to listen to your members well and encourage a safe environment where people can share struggles if they want to. While some people might not want to share, it can be helpful to put yourself forward as willing to offer help to anyone in your group according to your specific gifts.

Conclusion:

We began with a bleak picture, so let's end with a better one. We all know the weight of the boulder. Some days, especially after days when we have let our burdens slip and felt the pang of true failure, we don't even want to try. But having hope means keeping one picture in your

head as we struggle. Imagine seeing that boulder roll down the mountain on the other side! Imagine that day when our burdens of sin and work are truly lifted as Christ returns and we enter into eternity with dancing and laughing and tears of joy! The pain that we face today in a fallen world will soon subside. In the meantime, our lot is to encourage and love our neighbor. Endeavor in ministry today to preach the Gospel and seek the holiness and love of your Christian brothers and sisters.