



HG2: 1 Thessalonians (2/6) 'Growing Pains'

1 Thessalonians 2:1-20

Home Group Sermon Notes

21st September 2008 - Revd Paul A. Carr

Introduction: After commending the Thessalonians in ch1, Paul begins to share his pastor's heart, which is something quite unusual as he has a reputation for being a 'hit and run' evangelist. But, in ch2, we get a sense of Paul's deep concern for the spiritual development of the Thessalonians alongside the recognition that this growing up would be painful. Who can remember that old Neil Sedaka song: *Breaking up is hard to do?* He may as well have sung: *Growing up is hard to do!* Which of us, in our human/spiritual lives have not suffered from Growing pains? None of us! We all know that growing up can be painful. I want to suggest five pains from ch2!

1) The pains of being a Faithful Steward, vs1-6: Paul, vs4, had been: *entrusted with the Gospel*. It wasn't a message he made up or received from men (Galatians 1:11-12) but from God. He looked on himself as a steward of God's message. And, whilst the text doesn't mention the word steward, 'stewardship' is implicit in what is meant here. A steward owns nothing, only those things that belong to his master. One of the most important qualities a steward possesses is faithfulness (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). *Being effective in our Christian life requires much more than simply knowing the basic facts about Jesus. It requires us being faithful to God's word in all that He teaches us through it.* This may have made Paul unpopular in the eyes of men - we know Paul's preaching had provoked much opposition; he, and Silas had been beaten at Philippi, yet continued to preach the Gospel - but he dared not be unfaithful in the eyes of God, vs4: *We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.*

I've always been of the opinion that, whilst it's nice to be loved, liked and popular (not!) my primary aim in ministry is to please God not people. He is the one to whom I/all of us, are accountable, which is why I take what I do very seriously. Yes, it's great that we can have a laugh, and have fun together, as we do, but my responsibility as a minister, in fact, it's a responsibility we all share, which is to please God and to take the Christian faith very seriously, because it has eternal consequences. Paul assures them, vs3: *... the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives.* Paul confirms that Jesus' death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:16) is a true message and is the only true Gospel (Galatians 1:6-12). However, you know as well as I do, that it's possible to preach the right message with the wrong motives - maybe not so much in this country, but certainly in USA: God Channel; Jonah (Philippians 1:14-19).

Some people in Paul's day used religion as a way to make money. Paul didn't use the Gospel, vs5: *as a mask to cover up greed ...* He was open and honest in all his dealings. He didn't want to give anyone a reason to accuse him of being a religious salesman (1 Corinthians 9:1-18). I've heard people say how they don't care about the method just as long as the message is right. I don't agree with those sentiments at all. I believe we must have integrity in the way we proclaim, and minister, the Gospel. Some Christians try to win friends and influence people by pandering to individual egos rather than trusting in God's word. I believe that Christians who 'play to the grandstand' lose God's anointing, on their life and ministry. *It's not a cheap Gospel that is easily compromised for the sake of expediency, but a costly Gospel that required the death of God's only Son.*

2) The pains of feeding on God's Word, vs7-12: Paul recognises that the Thessalonians are young in faith and he uses the analogy of babies to make his point. Vs7, reads: a nursing mother cherishing her own children. Now this may seem unusual that a man as tough and as masculine as Paul should use feminine symbolism. A bit of a 21st century man who isn't afraid to do his fair share of feeding the baby and changing the nappies. But I think it outlines something of Paul's heart in dealing with the infant church.

A nursing mother devotes her whole life to her child. And we can all learn from the gentle, loving, self-sacrificing approach of a mother in our pastoral care. This is what Paul is saying in vs8: *We loved you so much ... we shared our lives with you.* Paul had a patient love as he nourished their faith. There's no doubt that it takes a great deal of patience to care for new babies. Sleepless nights. Children who insist in sleeping in your bed. Food fights. Bath fights. I don't want to go to school. We've all been there at some point in our lives. I can remember my mother saying that she needed the patience of a saint to cope when I was younger - what goes round, comes round! How would we define a baby Christian? As someone who: hasn't grown up; is not willing to live a holy life; is not prepared to wrestle with, and apply, the teaching of the Bible to their lives. In 1st and 2nd Corinthians we read that the believers in Corinth engaged in a lot of ungodly behaviour because of their immaturity: arguing; quarrelling; cheating; lawsuits; adultery and drunkenness. Both Paul and Peter encourage new believers to be like newborn babies, 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 and 1 Peter 2:1-3.

After using the example of a mother, Paul moves, vs11-12, into a fathers role. Paul's desire, vs12, was that his children might: *Live lives worthy of God.* Not bad 'fatherly' motivation! Just as a father wants to be proud of his children, so the Lord wants to receive glory through the lives of His children. It's a joy, for most parents, to see children blossom with his or her own personality, talents and ambitions. But it's sad to see a child rebel against the rules, abandoning traditions and standards, thinking this kind of lifestyle shows freedom and maturity. Although I've yet to experience that as a parent, I can relate to it when I look back on my unruly, rebellious teenage years.

Maturity, doesn't just happen overnight. Children all experience growing pains and encounter problems as they mature and so do we as Christians. Are you ready to grow in your faith? If you are, then you have to make the effort. Have you read your Bible since last Sunday? I've mentioned last years SU survey before where they suggest that something like 68% of regular churchgoers never read the Bible from one Sunday to the next. That stuns me. It comes as no surprise, on that evidence, that 68% Christians have little depth to their faith and have yet to mature. How healthy would a child be if, after five years, they were still drinking milk and not feeding on solids? I'm always encouraged to see a Bible well thumbed and well worn because it shows that it's being read. And: *when a Bible's well used*, sang Larry Norman, *the devils not amused!* Good Christian books and literature can also help us to grow and is something I would encourage. Just as a nursing child can become ill through a reaction to something the mother has eaten, so can the Christian by what they read, watch and listen to. We must be careful not to feed on things, which stunt our growth as Christians. However, we must never get into the habit of treating the Bible as any other book. It isn't. It is the Word of God. It was inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16) and written by men of God who were used by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21). God's Word is holy, pure, and perfect (Psalm 19:7-9). A hunger for God's word will shape our relationship with the Lord. Just as a baby initially feeds on milk, then moves to soft food and eventually onto solids.

So must we move on and develop in our faith. There is a need to move onto the meatier aspects of God's word. Nothing substitutes for knowledge of God's Word. That's the only way we begin to grow up. The only way we come to know God is through personal, factual and practical knowledge of His plans and purposes.

3) The pains of growing in God's Word, vs13: We can't deny that growing up isn't a painful experience – because it can be, and is. If a child doesn't want to hear what we have to say, does it mean that we stop saying what we know is the truth and good for their well-being? We tell them to keep off the cooker or fireplace because it may harm them. If they whinge and moan we don't say: OK, do what you like. We keep telling them the truth until they accept what we have to say. And so it is with Paul. He wants the Thessalonians to understand the importance of God's word and he continues to teach the same truths until it sinks in and they begin to grow in obedience to God's word. Being true to God's Word is to present the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, and trusting Him to work. My words are absolutely useless if God, by His Holy Spirit, doesn't anoint what I have to share and touch your hearts and minds. The message of the Bible is eternal and life changing. It is always relevant and always speaks to the issues of our time. I like the way Eugene Peterson puts 2 Timothy 3:16 in *The Message: Every part of scripture is God breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.*

Remember how God commanded Joshua, 1:7-8, to: *Be strong and courageous. Do not let this book of the law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything that is written in it.* Joshua was called to be strong and courageous in his personal submission to the word of God - God knows how hard it is! He was to read it every day and make it a part of his inner being by meditating on it. It's the only way we can begin to understand something of God's plans and purposes for our lives and His church. It's one thing to receive God's Word and quite another to accept it, but this is what the Thessalonians did. But it's in applying God's word where we begin to struggle isn't it? It can be very uncomfortable, because it is a challenge to us. Hebrews 4:12: *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

It can be very painful growing up! We are commanded to be holy as God is holy and to live in the light and to be a people who are distinctively different because we are followers of Jesus. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:3-4, we are to keep away from: *sexual immorality ... impurity ... greed ... obscenity ... foolish talk ... coarse joking* Vs5 goes on to point out that: *such a man is an idolater and has no place in the kingdom of God.* God isn't a killjoy. He knows these things cause us harm and bring harm to others. But His hearts desire is for each of us to reach our fullness and our potential in him, Ephesians 3:19. This means that if you are engaging in sexual immorality, whatever form that may take, you need to stop. If you are involved in impure practises, you need to walk away. If you have a problem with greed, then you need to stop being so self-centred. If you find yourself uttering obscenities, then you need to guard your conversation. If you find yourself involved in gossip, then you need to bite your tongue. If you are telling lies, you need to start telling the truth. Continuing in them may well account for why your Christian life is a drag and ineffective. Ephesians 5:15: *Be very careful, then, how you live.*

The Thessalonians allowed God's Word to change their lives – there's no substitute for it. The same Word that brings us salvation also enables us to live for Jesus and endure suffering for His sake It enabled them to stand strong in the midst of persecution and kept them from wandering off in the wrong direction. Each of us have a responsibility to grow up spiritually and to respond to those parts of the Bible which are a bit more difficult to understand and to respond to those teachings we would, perhaps, choose to ignore. We need to take Bible study seriously and start to do so if we don't. It may mean using Bible study notes. Joining a house group, or ?

4) The pains of growing in God's world, vs14-16: Paul highlights two types of suffering here. Suffering that comes as a consequence of obeying God and suffering as a consequence of rejecting God. Each of us endure suffering simply because we are Christians. It can be difficult being a Christian in today's world where Biblical morals, ethics and attitudes are laughed at and ignored. We can so easily find ourselves isolated and alienated because we follow Jesus. If we are living in the way God is calling us to, we will suffer for His sake (2 Timothy 3:12). Jesus, of course, promised that this would happen (John 15:18-27). Perhaps your family has disowned you because of your faith? Perhaps you've experienced all sorts of conflict in your personal and working lives because you refuse to compromise your faith? Perhaps you've had to walk away from a friendship that was causing you so much pain and conflict and dragging you down in your faith because you felt you had no alternative? Perhaps being a Christian is a cause of friction in your marriage? These experiences hurt - there's no doubt about that - but they are not ours alone. We are not the only ones going through the furnace. We may not experience the same kind of political/religious persecution that the early Christians suffered - though in some parts of the world today it is just as intense as it was then. Sometimes I have felt more than a little embarrassed when I have a whinge and a moan about how things are for me and then read how people in other parts of the world who are really suffering for the Gospel's sake and are facing so much difficulty and enduring so much more than I do. It makes my problems pale into insignificance by comparison.

Paul assured the Thessalonians that their experiences weren't new or isolated. Others had suffered before them and were even then suffering with them. Sometimes we think that we are the only ones suffering and we can become quite 'self-centred.' Every generation, every century, has seen this happen because people will always reject, and be angered by, Jesus' claim to be: *the way, the truth and the life,* (John 14:6). In 2 Corinthians 6:5-10, Paul wrote about what he endured for the Gospel's sake: The early church was not destroyed by suffering, if anything, it made them stronger and their faith, and numbers, increased. One of the great features of the local church is that we stand together in times of difficulty and encourage one another. It was when Elijah isolated himself from the other faithful Israelites in 1 Kings 19 that he became discouraged and wanted to die. A lonely saint is very vulnerable to attack from the enemy and this reminds us how important community is. Learning from, and encouraging, each other is what being a Christian community is all about.

5) The pains of growing in God's glory, vs17-20: Paul's desire, vs12, is for them to: *Live lives worthy of God* and so must we (Colossians 1:10; Philippians 1:27). The verb used in vs12 is in the present tense, that is: we are continually being called to a life of holiness and obedience. We are to walk worthy of the calling we have in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 4:1). But Paul didn't look back, he looked ahead and rejoiced. Because, for the Christian, we believe the best is yet to come. Paul looked ahead by faith and saw his friends in the presence of Jesus in glory, vs19. In times of trouble and testing, that's the promise we have. Paul's actions were governed by what God would do in the future. He knows that Jesus will return and reward him for his faithful ministry and on that day, the saints from Thessalonica would bring glory to God and joy to Paul's heart.

Conclusion: If we want to be effective in our Christian lives, and be good witnesses/role models to the world around us, we need to grow up. The strength, and weakness, of any church is not Jesus, but the people in it. It's true isn't it? The Gospel is only as effective as our lifestyle and integrity as Christians. Growing up as a Christian is not without its pains. It can be painful as we seek to be faithful stewards of all that God has given to us. It can be painful as we feed on His word and mature in our faith. It can be painful as we grow into God's word; as we wrestle with the standards that God sets for us compared with what we are, or not as the case maybe, prepared to do. It can be painful being a Christian in today's world where Biblical morals, ethics and attitudes are laughed at and ignored. Where we can so easily find ourselves isolated and alienated because we follow Jesus. It can also painful growing in God's glory as he fashions and shapes us to be a holy people, yet we have the promise of a *crown of glory* as the reward for our faithfulness.

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Home Group Study Sheet

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COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION **BEFORE** THE MEETING!

Don't forget to take your Bible to House Group along with any previous/other notes that might be helpful.

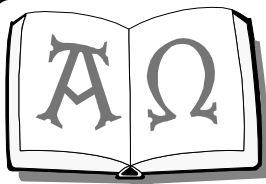
Welcome/Icebreaker (10 mins)

What is your most favourite film?



Looking Upwards - *Worship* (10 mins)

Songs of Worship; Prayers; Bible Readings; Meditations etc.



Looking Upwards - *Bible Study* (40 mins)

Read through the above Bible reading (and any readings below and the references in the sermon notes) and answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss your answers in your Home Group.

1: Does it really matter if people preach the right message with the wrong motives? Is the method insignificant or does it have an impact on the validity of the Gospel?

2: Have you ever been tempted to please men rather than God in your Christian life, vs3-6? What, do you think, are the implications of pleasing men before God, both in your own life and in church life?

3: What can we learn from (the apostle) Paul's examples of caring: 'like a mother for her little children' and as 'a father caring for his own children' vs7-12?

4: In what ways might being caring and gentle, like a 'mother and father' become more a part of your evangelistic efforts?

5: What are the barriers that stop you maturing as a Christian? What, if any, are the issues you need to address? Do you feel as though you are a 'babe' in Christ? Might an indifferent approach to reading, and receiving, the Bible be a contributory factor to this?

6: What should be the right attitude to the Word of God, vs13? (Read also 2 Timothy 2:3-16; Hebrews 4:12; Ephesians 5:3-4).

7: What difficulties did the Thessalonians face in sharing their faith with others, vs14-16? Give some examples of how sharing your faith has been a positive and a negative experience.

8: Have you found growing up as a Christian to be a painful experience? In what ways might this be true? How does this compare with Paul's sufferings in 2 Corinthians 6:5-10?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards - *Caring for each other* (15 mins)

Is there anything you would like to share with the group:

For Thanksgiving?

For Prayer?

Or for help from the group?

*(Reflect with the Lord on your life at the moment and think if there is anything you would like to share and which you feel is appropriate. This is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however - 'it's the sharing that enables the caring!')*



Looking Outwards - *Concern for others* (15 mins)

Is there anything concerning someone in: church; family; friends; or neighbours which you would like to share:

For Thanksgiving?

For Prayer?

Or for possible action by the group?

(Please be careful not to pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared).

