

As Pastor Steve said, we're starting a new series, and this morning is called "Praying through trials". So we're going to read from II Thessalonians 1:1-12.

[Reading II Thessalonians 1:1-12]

There's a lot there – Pastor Steve never gives me a single verse to preach on, he always gives me a lot, but I'll do my best to pack it in.

It's useful to just give a little bit of background concerning the context of the importance of this church in Thessalonica. It's widely agreed that this was the first church to which Paul wrote and it's the first letter to the Thessalonians (there's two) which is considered to be the earliest of the letters in the New Testament, and if you know (and most of you probably do) but the letters as they're listed in the New Testament are not in chronological order: they are in order of size, so the biggest one comes first. But the Thessalonians one was the first one that he wrote to, and it is a church he had an awful lot of love for – it's possibly one of the first churches that he planted. But even though in the Thessalonian society (you can't say Thessalonian too many times too quickly – it just doesn't roll off the tongue) had obtained independence from the Roman Empire and Roman rule, they still retaining an allegiance to the imperial cult of Rome: so they would still acknowledge that Caesar was lord – they wouldn't acknowledge that Jesus was Lord. And any descent from this allegiance to the imperial cult or Caesar as lord was subject to severe punishment. And we have to understand the letter and what Paul is talking about in this context, and when we understand things in this context of widespread persecution Jesus' command to love one another takes on a whole different understanding, a different and much weightier emphasis. When we talk about loving one another here, it sort of sounds a little bit kind of nice. But when we're talking about loving one another in terms of persecution then it becomes something altogether different because the love that you have one another is absolutely necessary because without it you cannot endure.

And from the perspective of the spreading of the Gospel, or the propagation of the Gospel, the city was of enormous strategic importance because it provided a gateway into Western Europe. Paul is commending the Thessalonians in his letter, in this beginning to the letter, for having followed the example of the Apostles, and also the example of Jesus, in both the inward expression of their faith and also the outward expression of their faith: so the inward devotion and an outward expression. And what Paul commends in both his letters, commends the Thessalonians for, is for standing firm in the Lord – as was said earlier in the service: no matter what, standing firm in the Lord no matter what. Paul writes and declares that the foundation of the Thessalonians' faith comes from God.

The origin (this is a quote from a commentary), the origin, the continued activity and the future consummation (the fulfilment of this Faith) rests solely in God's initiative – it doesn't arise from desires of the human heart, which for me (I know in my heart) is a tremendous encouragement because if it rests on my initiative, if it rests upon my faithfulness, then it's probably going to fail, but if it rests upon God's initiative, if it comes from his purpose, his initiative, his strategic plan, it's going to succeed. And therefore Paul's confident in his ability to boast in this church – he boasts about this church – because they're proving in this inward appropriation, this inward devotion, this outward expression of this faith, they're proving that the power of the Gospel is at work. In

their response to the trials that they are facing they are proving that the power of the Gospel is at work in their midst. Not, might I add, through signs and wonders, they're doing it simply through endurance in the face of affliction. And that is what Paul is commending them for.

If we turn to the text for a little bit, it's lovely, he says it a number of times: God our Father. This is the absolute foundation, the underpinning of our faith – not as individuals, but as a church. I was considering how to talk about this on the way in this morning. The church cannot exist on the basis of an individual: one person does not make a church, one person does not make a family, right? You need more than one person to make a family, you need more than one person to make a church. And Paul reminds us of this when he's saying God our Father. God our Father. God our Father, Jesus our Lord, exceeds us as individuals, but it brings us together and unites us. Paul does this a lot: it's the same way Pastor Steve spoke a few weeks ago when Jesus met Mary in the garden, and he spoke to her just after he was risen, and he said “I'm going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” And that's the point of connection.

And then he moves on and he talks about how the faith is growing: in verse 3 he says “if faith is growing your love is increasing.” And in the text, the Greek word indicates a sense of superabundance – superabundance, organic flourishing. Have you seen any of these kind of country fairs where someone's grown a marrow that's, like, six feet long? It's that kind of sense of superabundance. Love is increasing, faith is growing, superabundant. Superabundant like Jesus said when he came, “I've come that you may have life and have it to the full.” To have it to superabundance. And he says it again in Romans 5 where he talks about Grace super-abounding.

But this is the effect. It does cause and effect, and it does it the opposite way around: it starts with the effect – the effect is growing of faith, the effect is love increasing – and the cause is in verse 4 – and the cause of this increase in faith, and increase in love, is persecutions and trials. Isn't that strange? You'd think the cause of this faith growing and the cause of this love increasing might be that the church was being blessed with wealth. We sang it this morning: “Blessed in the desert place.” This superabundance is coming out of the place of persecutions and trial, it is coming out the place of affliction. This church is being severely persecuted. We don't really have a sense of that, do we? We don't really understand what that's like that – most of us haven't had that. The cause is persecutions and afflictions, and the effect is faith growing and love increasing. You could almost make the argument that faith wouldn't grow, and the love wouldn't increase, were there no persecutions and afflictions. And the result of all these persecutions and afflictions, the thing for which Paul is commending them, is their endurance – their enduring Faith, praying through trials. Although we can pray “Lord take me out of this trial” but often he doesn't; so what do you do when he doesn't take you out of the trial? You have to pray through the trial, don't you? We have to pray for other people through the trials.

But he also says that this endurance and this enduring faith is proof of the righteous judgement of God, and it's proof that they're being considered worthy of the Kingdom, This word “endurance” means a number of things, it means: to stay in place, to hold fast, again no matter what, no matter how hard the winds blowing at you, no matter how much the ship is rocking, you're going to hold fast, you stand, standing against opposition, holding out, staying still, not moving – we shall, we shall not be moved, remaining, enduring, staying in force, it's like a siege mentality. Faith is sometimes like a siege mentality: I'm not going to let go of this – we talked about promises last week. It doesn't matter what I seen in the physical, I'm going to hold fast to this God; I might not see him, but I'm going to hold fast to him. I've heard the promises – I might not be seeing them, but I'm going to hold fast to them, I'm going to endure. I heard a marvellous talk, a sermon on the

internet, which talked about the ever-increasing demands of faith. As you mature in your walk, your Christian walk, you might expect the trials to get less, but they actually don't – they actually don't! I was talking (bless you Maureen) to Maureen the other week about how it is when you get older, it gets it harder doesn't it; things get harder physically, they don't get easier: you lose people. And you've still got to endure through these trials, through these afflictions, wherever they come – whether if it's in your body, whether it's through losing people, through grief; whatever it might we endure.

But there's also another sense of this word “endure” which is an expectation: to expect someone, to expect someone to come. Almost like in the army when you're in this siege and you're expecting a relief to come, you're expecting a relief battalion to come, to bail you out – you've almost used up all your resources, most of your friends have been taken it and perished, and you're expecting the relief to come. This endurance is an expectation of someone coming to bring relief. It indicates to us (and he's trying to bring) a sense of the permanence of God – the enduring permanence of God – as opposed to our earthly fallibility and our earthly changeability.

God, as it says in the Old Testament, is the Eternal God; his counsel, his word abide forever. He will bring eventually, in Revelation, an Eternal City in a new Heaven and a new Earth which will endure forever, and he affords his righteous people, his Saints, his holy ones, a share in his enduring. This endurance, this faith, again comes from God. It's the power of God, it's the power of the Gospel: this enduring faith. When Paul says “I'm not ashamed of the Gospel,” he saying it in the context of the fact that he has been persecuted, he is writing it from Rome – in the city in which he will eventually be beheaded – and he's saying “I'm not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God for all who believe.”

And when you lay your faith upon God this enduring faith, this power to endure no matter what the trials, comes with it. God's counsel endures, his word endures, his New Covenant endures, faith, hope and love also endure in him. Christ remains forever the same yesterday, today and forever, and his spirit doesn't just visit us – it didn't just visit Jesus, it alighted upon him, it dwelled within him. And it doesn't just visit us, it indwells us – the enduring Spirit of God, the power of God, endures us and it remains on us as it did on Christ. We overcome the world by faith: John 16:33 “In this world you will have trouble, but in Chris Jesus we have peace.” And in 1 John 5:4 he talks about overcoming the world by faith.

I would like to read you a couple of examples of this, just present day because when you're talking about a church 2000 years ago it can seem a little bit remote, but I'd like just bring it a little bit more into the present day.

This is a book called “Desiring God” by a guy called John Piper, and in it he tells the story of Soviet occupied Romania before the country was liberated. And he's telling the story and it's is from an autobiography of a chap called Sergei Kourdakov, who wrote the book called “The Persecutor” – this is his autobiography, he was the persecutor. We was commissioned by a Russian Secret Police to raid prayer gatherings and persecute believers with extraordinary brutality, but the afflictions of one believer whom he encountered changed his life. And I'm going to warn you now, this is a little bit graphic, but I think it's important that we include this because of the story. This is what he writes, and it's about a young lady called Natasha. He says:

[Reads from autobiography. Précis: At the raid of one prayer meeting one of the heavies, Victor, held a beautiful young girl Natasha above his head and despite her pleadings for mercy threw her so hard she hit the wall at the same height and said “I bet the idea of God just left her”. Three

days later at another raid, Sergei was shocked to see Natasha again. He picked her up and flung her face down, stripped off her clothes and beat her whilst one of his men held her down. His hands stung and her skin blistered, and continued to beat until pieces of flesh came off. To suppress her cries she bit right through her lip. A few days later he was shocked and amazed to encounter her at another raid. One of his heavies, Alex, pushed forward full of hatred with a club towards her but Victor jumped between them and stopped Alex getting to Natasha. Alex told him to get out of the way but Victor refused, protecting Natasha. Sergei was amazed that one of his most brutal men was protecting one of the believers. Victor had seen she had something they didn't; so did Sergei: after all the warning and sufferings here she was again – she had something they didn't! As he reflected upon Natasha whom he never saw again, he wrote to her telling her that because although terribly beaten she was willing to suffer again, he had become a Christian, God had forgiven him and hoped she would as well.]

There's just one more passage in the book I want to read here. He's talking about a chap called Joseph Sang who was, again, somebody who came out of Soviet occupied Romania. He does a paraphrase of what Paul writes, Paul saying

[Reads from Autobiography. Précis: Thinking as if Paul considers what would have happened if Paul had stayed only pastoring the church in Antioch, an affluent and peaceful city. The Gospel would not have gone out and nobody in Asia minor nor Western Europe would have been saved; in order for them to be saved he had to endure beatings, etc. Concluding how many are not saved because we stay “safe” in our churches and don't take out the message of the cross?]

It's kind of powerful and tragic really, isn't it, because how many are saved because we don't accept the cross? We can talk all we like sometimes – as they say talk is cheap. For people to hear the message of the Gospel, sometimes they have to see the love of God first, sometimes they have to see the endurance of the people of God first, so that they can then hear the message and understand it because they've already seen it, so that when it comes to them in years, it's not the first time, and it's not something they have to intellectually appropriate because they already have a picture of it, they've already witnessed it.

You can see it in the Christians in Ukraine now. I found a website – it's extraordinary, it's extraordinary what people are talking about in Ukraine. This is what one of Christian leaders said: “Fear paralyses but prayer, trusting in God, caring for your neighbour, brings strength.” Fear paralyses – that's the danger. A solution is prayer, trusting in God, caring for our neighbours, because that brings strength.

You heard of the Prosperity Gospel? A Prosperity Gospel that teaches that all you need, the best evidence of your faith, is that you're going to be healthy and wealthy – the Prosperity Gospel. Naming it and claiming it: I want to have a Land Rover, I need to have a Range Rover, I'm going to pray for that – we're going to name it and God's going to give it to me. Having your best life now. There was a song written, a Christian song “I'll have my best life now”. How could that possibly be true? Jesus isn't here! I'll have my best life when Jesus comes back. This kind of teaching is a wilful misinterpretation of scripture, and anybody who teaches this kind of thing, I would love for them, I'd love to be there at the judgement, at the Resurrection when Paul is raised, and they're raised, and they're trying to say to Paul “Did you have your best life in the flesh?” What would Paul say to them? He'd say you don't understand the power of the Gospel. You don't understand the power of the Gospel.

If that's what you're paying for, you need to be praying for endurance through trials. Anybody

who teaches that your best life is going to come now, and that what you're called to as a Christian is to have your best life now, needs to be remonstrated with because they're teaching a different Gospel, and a different Jesus, and it's a different spirit, and it's needs to be called out.

Paul's preaching here in his letter: there's a link between Justice and suffering. There's a link between Justice and suffering: the suffering of the persecuted now he says ensures the just punishment of the wicked. The suffering of the persecuted now, the suffering of the people of God, is ensuring a just punishment of the wicked in the future, and in the same way, the future suffering of the wicked is presented as a form of relief to those who are suffering persecution now.

You're suffering persecution now not because of who you are – it's not personal to you – it's because of Jesus; you're suffering it on account of Jesus, and at some point down the road people who are visiting this persecution upon you will face judgement. And it's not something to be looked forward to it, it's not something we should think “Oh, that's great: these people are going to suffer judgement because they're visiting all this persecution upon Christians.” We're not called to that, we called to love those people who are visiting judgement upon Christians now, to pray for them, and to preach the Gospel to them. That's what Natasha did to Sergei, to Victor, to Alex.

He talks about a twofold peril: those who do not know God, and those who do not obey the Gospel – and those are two different things. It's not that those who do not obey God, do not know God, are the ones you don't obey the Gospel. There's those who do not know God, and then there's those who do know God and don't obey the Gospel.

I talk a little bit because I have to, because it's in the text – I have to talk about eternal punishment. This is an extremely contentious doctrine now. We don't like to talk about Hell, we don't like to consider that there's a God who has constructed the universe and an eternity in which they will be punishment for those who are wicked. But it's true, and I've put this picture up – this is an artist's rendition, or depiction, of a super-massive black hole. Do you know anything about black holes? Black holes are a place where light cannot penetrate, where matter cannot penetrate, when everything which goes into it is ruined – it reaches what's called a singularity where everything: time stops, light disappears. No matter, there's no real even darkness, because there's nothing. So there can't be any darkness – it's not even space. There's nothing. Everything's been compressed to the point where it's obliterated.

I think that God has made this, and put this in the universe, to give us an idea of what it might be like to face this eternal punishment, because everything it in and around the super-massive black hole, all of the matter that comes around it, when it gets pulled into the gravitational pull of this black hole, it starts to get torn apart. All the atoms start to separate and they pulled in one by one. It's like this slow destruction, this slow ruin, for everything is just getting torn apart, and I get a sense that this is what I might be like to face eternal punishment, to face Hell.

I was suicidal for 10 years – as part of my addiction I was suicidal for 10 years. And on top of a car park in Bromley I was planning on taking my life and God gave me a vision of Hell, that this would be my fate if I did that, if I followed through with my desire that this would be my fate. And it helped because I didn't do it. We shouldn't be afraid to preach this, we shouldn't be afraid to teach this is something which awaits people who do not know God and don't obey the Gospel. And our hearts should go out to anybody who doesn't.

I think it might have been Bill who a few weeks ago when we were doing one of our activities here, and he wrote down just this fear, this fear for people who don't know God and don't obey the

Gospel. They don't even know that this is going to be their fate, they haven't had that revelation, and they're just plummeting head forward into this absolute tragedy and no one's telling them. And that's what we're called to do. It's what we're called to do, not in a kind of excited way of turn or burn because you're going to burn, but just please turn, please stop going down this road, because this is your eternity. It's not even like it's something which is just going to be blink-done-gone; this will be an eternity for those who don't know God, who don't obey the Gospel.

Being shut out from the presence of the Lord, and from the majesty of his power – Paul specifically writes this to remind the Thessalonians that even though they're enduring persecution from an earthly force, and however strong that force might look, it's nothing in comparison to the power of God. It's nothing in comparison to the power of God of the universe. Satan was a created being, so even though he might have taken a third of the angels, you've still got two-thirds of the angels which are being supported by the Father, Son and Holy Ghost – which side would you rather stand on? A third of the angels who followed the deceiver, or you've got any other side two-thirds of the angels who are supported by the one who made them all?

And this is put you in that way – it's not hard choice to make. A guy called Denny wrote this: if there is any truth in scripture at all that those who stubbornly refuse to submit to the Gospel, and to love and obey Jesus Christ, will incur at the last advent, the second coming, an infinite and irreparable loss. They will pass into a night on which no morning will ever dawn.

And I say that knowing full well that I've got two brothers, I've got a father and stepmother, I've got aunts and uncles who do not know God and do not obey the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and this is their fate. And it breaks my heart. Should I not tell them, should I tell them? Should I tell them? I should tell them, shouldn't I? You should tell people. Don't be afraid to tell people. 'cause will we bear any kind of accountability for the people that we didn't tell? I think we will. I think we will! So we should tell them.

And this is what brings back to prayer. What do we pray for? We give thanks for the people in our midst who are showing and demonstrate an enduring faith. I could call some people out but they'd be embarrassed and they'd be annoyed at me, so I'd better not. But I know some people in this congregation who are demonstrating that same faith of the Thessalonians, and I boast about them, and I give thanks to the Lord for you. I give thanks to the Lord for those of you are going through incredible trials and enduring through it, and still giving faith and still ringing praise to God, no matter what – I'll boast about you. I'll boast about you to people, and I will never stop doing it.

So that we may be found worthy of the calling – worthy of the calling, what's the calling? Paul talks about it in his second letter to Timothy; he talks about being called to suffer for the Gospel – and how do we suffer for the Gospel? We suffer for the Gospel by the power of God – that's what he writes: we suffer for the Gospel by the power of God. So that's what we need to pray for for each other, that we would experience the power of God to be able to suffer for the Gospel. And that we can encourage one another. Paul is encouraged by the church – he's writing to them to tell them all these things, but it's the church that are encouraging him because he's an apostle, he's been called, and he's suffering. But it's the church that's encouraging him. So praise the Lord, thank you for encouraging me to continue to do what I'm doing, because I need the encouragement, and if I'm going to continue to pray for all of you, because you're worth it – you have been found worthy of the calling, you been found worthy of the Gospel. Praise the Lord! Our worthiness. And this is the extraordinary thing because it comes back to this: we have been found worthy of the calling not through our own power but through his – it rests upon his

fulfilment. So we're praying to be found worthy of the calling and he is the one who does it through us. No matter what we're facing, it's him who enables us to endure by his power, by his power, to glorify the name, to glorify the person of Christ. Twofold glorification: Jesus Christ is glorified in us, and we are glorified in him.

It's part of God's righteous judgement to use tribulations and trials to bring his own people to perfection. God might want you to be healthy and wealthy, but more than that he wants you to be holy. And if he needs to bring trials to do it in our affluent and comfortable society, then he'll do it because he wants you holy, he wants you to bear the image of his Son, and he'll use any means to do it. And he won't be the one bringing it, but he'll allow it, if it's going to make you more like Jesus, so that the world can see Jesus in you, so that you can be glorified in him and so that he can be glorified in you.

Character, character, Christian character.

Bless you all.