

The Gospel Transformation of Paul

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

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Reflecting on this past year and on all that God has provided, there are 3 privileges that stand out. First is that of becoming a mother, which not only was my long-held aspiration, but also continues to humble me, revealing my weakness, pushing me to love self-sacrificially, and reminding me of the self-sacrificial love that God has for us as our Father. Going through the pain of labor also reminded me of the pain that Jesus went through for all of us, without which none of us could be born again. The second privilege was having much needed maternity leave, which enabled me to focus completely on being a mother. Even without having to work, the first month of being a mother was the most tiring and all-consuming experience of my life, and it again reminded me of Jesus' example and all that He gave to provide for us. The generosity of brothers and sisters to give us baby stuff, food, prayers, many encouraging words, and visits really lifted us up during a difficult time of transition. And third is the privilege of learning from Scripture, which during these months away from church has forced me to become more disciplined in self-study. In order to gain more discipline in studying the Bible, I joined BSF in the months before giving birth. It so happens that in both BSF and in our children's Sunday school we are studying Acts and the epistles of Paul, which is what we will be focusing on today.

In Acts, Jesus calls the disciples to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Acts is about the spread of the gospel both geographically as well as from the Jews to the Gentiles. The Jewish leadership rejected Jesus and continued to persecute His followers after His ascension. However, God used this persecution to kick-start the spread of the gospel. When the Jews stoned Stephen and started viciously persecuting Christians in Jerusalem, it caused the Christians to be scattered, bringing the gospel wherever they went. And God also used Paul, once a Pharisee who approved of Stephen's stoning and zealously persecuted Christians, to spread the gospel as one of the most influential witnesses and the apostle to the Gentiles. After his miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul became passionately devoted to the work of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We see in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 how the gospel transformed Paul's life. Once he was a Pharisee who held a rigid and legalistic religion that led to hatred for God's people. But now he lives a life centered on the gospel, which leads to Christ-like love. Paul works tirelessly for the

gospel, first preaching to Jews and then to Gentiles. And wherever he goes, he not only brings the message of the gospel, but he also lives out the gospel in self-sacrificial love, modeled after the love of Christ. In v.7 he says that he cared for the Thessalonians as a nursing mother, and in v. 11 he says that he raised them like a father. After becoming a mother, I realized just how much sacrifice goes into nursing. Everything I eat is like fuel in order to make milk for my child. This giving of oneself out of love is what Paul is talking about here. And as a new father, Johnston is starting to think about raising Ellie in a way that gives her a good future. Paul likewise is concerned about raising the Thessalonians to mature spiritually and he sees himself as sort of a spiritual parent to them. Through encouragement, comfort, care, and exhortation he raises them to follow his example and live gospel-centered lives, abounding in the love of Jesus.

In vv. 2-6 and 8-10 Paul models the gospel-centered life. He proclaims the unadulterated truth of the gospel and shows love to others with pure motives. Paul doesn't pervert the gospel by twisting it to please people, yet in his actions he shows love to them and raises them up in the gospel truth as his own family. He freely gives up his rights as an apostle so that he would not burden the Thessalonians or hinder them from receiving the gospel. And this is all so that they may grow in faith and love. He thanks God for their faith and love, but urges them to continue in love more and more (3:12-4:1, 9-10).

Ever since the shelter-in-place order started, some of us have had more time to have fellowship virtually. When this quarantine period ends and our lives get busy, let us not forget to meet together. In Hebrews 13:1-3 we are encouraged to continue in love, being hospitable to strangers and remembering the persecuted. I would also add that we should remember to share with each other how the gospel has transformed us and continue to be witnesses to our children, to each other, and to unbelievers in our lives. It's not only the pastors' and ministers' job to spread the gospel. We are all called to proclaim and live out the gospel. Parents should teach children to live it out. All of us should witness by sharing the truth of the gospel, encouraging one another in faith, and letting the love of Jesus overflow from within us to everyone around us.