

## ***The Fine Art of Bearing Fruit***

### ***1 Thessalonians 2:1-5***

***The Savior's servants walk a weary way.  
And at the starting gate, the swiftest may  
Seem like the surest ones to finish strong.  
But it's not starting speed but strength to stay  
That turns a death march dirge into a song.  
Although the path is stony, steep and long  
Those who're victorious refuse to quit.  
Ah yes, when pleasure's pain and right is wrong  
There's always waysides where the faint can sit  
And nurse their wounds til bones have knit.  
But those who shoulder sorrow, sores and shame  
And hobble on in pain alone are fit  
To heal the lost, the leprous, and the lame  
And magnify the Master's precious Name.***

Our Savior told stories straight out of the lives of the simple country people who heard Him. He told one about a farmer.

With a sack of seed on his hip, he walked over plowed ground, sowing seeds as he went. But not all of those seeds grew and flourished as he hoped they would.

However, some of them did. They not only sprouted and grew. They produced a great deal of fruit.

***Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty...the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. Matthew 13:7-8,23***

At Thessalonica, the apostle Paul was just such a fruitful servant. He put it simply and succinctly.

***For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, Verse 1***

The words, *was not in vain* might be better translated, *has not proved to be empty*. The missionary's stay at Thessalonica was the farthest thing from barren and fruitless.

That was not by accident, of course. The way the apostle worked is what made all the difference.

He planted the message of the Master's life and love, of His saving power like good seed in fertile soil. And he harvested a crop of changed lives and loving children of God.

At Thessalonica, Paul was allowed to be both the planter and the harvester. But many godly servants are not so fortunate.

However, we know the Gospel seed is good. And it will surely sprout and grow in lives. So we do not have to see that harvest to know it is both solid and sure.

But if there is to be a harvest at all, we must work in the same ways Paul did.

## *Sacrifice*

Paul first traveled to modern day Greece in obedience to a God given vision. He started his work there in the Roman province of Macedonia at Philippi.

And for a while, things went well. But then he was dragged before the city magistrates by an angry mob. Without a trial or even being allowed to defend themselves, Paul and Silas were savagely beaten and thrown into prison.

The apostle recalled that time of trouble in this letter to the Lord's people at Thessalonica.

***...after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition. Verse 2***

Walking down the Roman road to Thessalonica, Paul and Silas were still aching from the beating they endured at Philippi. But that did not stop them from boldly proclaiming Christ.

They might well have been tempted to adopt a milder manner and proclaim Christ more carefully and quietly. But they didn't.

And the beating Paul endured at Philippi was nothing new. Later, he would recount all the horrors he endured at an apostle.

***Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. 2 Corinthians 11:24-28***

Paul's life as a missionary was a pattern of pain, sacrifice and suffering. Wherever he went, he was beaten and mistreated.

But he did not let that stop him. Neither painful memories nor open wounds sapped his courage.

Time and time again, Paul was maligned and mistreated, beaten and berated for sharing the good news of God's love and the Savior's sacrifice. But he never let that stop him.

He was willing to sacrifice to serve the Savior. And that is not merely important. It is essential if we are to be successful servants for our loving Lord.

Paul never allowed ugly experiences to stifle his courage. And if we are to be both faithful and fruitful servants, we cannot do so, either. We must renew our courage and reinvigorate our resolve.

However, all too often, sincere saints do just the opposite. They start out serving the Savior with passion and purpose, with enthusiasm and energy.

But then they are maligned or mistreated by church members who are cold and carnal. Tragically, many of those servants are so stunned and scarred, they are afraid to serve the Savior.

So Satan wins another round. Fortunately, the book of Revelation offers us instructions how we can defeat the devil.

***...they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death. Revelation 12:11***

The heavenly voice the apostle John heard listed three spiritual weapons Christians have. And they are so lethal, they cannot help but defeat the prince of darkness.

The first two are familiar. Preachers often talk about them. And well they should. No servant of God can wage war with the devil without claiming the power of our Savior's blood sacrifice and leaning on both the message of the Gospel and the Word of God.

But a third weapon remains. And it is a powerful weapon believers can wield to throw down the devil's dark strongholds, too. That is the weapon that helped the apostle Paul defeat the demonic stronghold in the pagan city of Thessalonica.

Our Savior was victorious through suffering. We who serve Jesus as our Master must never suppose we will have a softer, smoother path than He did. And we are left with an important lesson.

We cannot bear fruit for our faithful Lord and His loving Father if we allow ugly experiences to stifle our witness and our work.

We must be willing to sacrifice if we are to harvest souls.

## *Sincerity*

Ananias was a shy, unassuming little man. So when God told him Jerusalem's great persecutor of Christians was there in Damascus at an inn on Straight Street, he was stunned and surprised.

The Lord also told Ananias that he was to go and pray for Saul of Tarsus. And that filled the little man with terror.

But the Savior's Spirit was adamant. He commanded Ananias to go and pray for the persecutor. And He told him why.

***But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;" Acts 9:15***

Not one of the believers in Jerusalem would have even imagined God would choose Saul of Tarsus to proclaim Christ to people both far and near. They would never have chosen Paul.

But God did. And the former pharisee never forgot it.

***...we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, Verse 4***

Dwight was an uneducated farm boy. As a teenager, he left home and went to work in his uncle's shoe store, wrapping shoes in the backroom. That was about all he was qualified to do.

No one who knew Dwight would have chosen him to be a worldwide evangelist. But that is just what God did. And Dwight Moody brought thousands of people to faith in Jesus Christ.

There is no higher honor in life than to be chosen by God to bear the message of Christ's cross and empty tomb. Paul understood that better than anyone else ever could.

He never forgot that God is the One who chose him to proclaim the riches of Christ in great gentile cities. He also knew he was merely a messenger, an ambassador for the Most High God.

***...we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; 2 Corinthians 5:20***

And an ambassador is not only bound to deliver his king's message. He must also do so in the exact way his king commands.

That is how it was with Paul. And that is the way it must be with us. For we have been called and commanded to tell men and women about God's love and the Savior's sacrifice, too.

The humbling realization that God chose him both guided and guarded Paul as he served His Savior.

***For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; Verse 3***

That is one reason why the great apostle was always careful that the Gospel message he shared was absolutely accurate. False teachers made it a habit to follow Paul around, teaching a message

that came from their own imagination.

But that was not true of any of the men the Master chose to serve as His special messengers. Peter put it best.

***...we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. 2 Peter 1:16***

If the Gospel we share is to be without error, it must be accurate. There is no room for any additions to the message of salvation.

It makes no difference how stunning a man's personal revelation might be, it cannot be allowed to alter or add to the Gospel our Savior shed His blood to purchase.

Also, the Gospel we proclaim must be complete. We cannot ignore some aspects of the message, eliminating the requirement for repentance or commitment, for instance.

Finally, our Gospel message must not only be complete and accurate. It must also be in balance. We cannot overemphasize some aspects of salvation. Neither do we dare to minimize the importance of other aspects. Salvation must be both complete and balanced.

Paul was also careful that his message never promoted impurity. And that was something new for men and women who once worshiped at pagan temples. Pagan priests never emphasized purity. In fact, most of them both urged and exalted sin and sensuality.

But we who have been chosen to bear our Master's message of life and love serve a God whose purity is absolute. And He expects the very same from His servants. That is Christ's command.

***...you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Matthew 5:48***

Our Savior died to set us free from sin. So it is unthinkable to either indulge or allow sin in our lives or in our message.

Such a soiled message cannot plant eternal life in anyone.

## ***Selflessness***

Late in life, God told King David his son Solomon would reign after his death. So to help prepare the young man to rule over God's people, the old king offered his son some words of counsel.

And tucked away in David's words of wisdom is a simple statement about the Lord God.

***...the Lord searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. 1 Chronicles 28:9***

That verse was not unknown to Paul. As a scholar of the scriptures, he knew the great God of Heaven weighs the thoughts and intents of his heart.

The apostle also understood that his loving Lord not only expected that he willingly suffer and proclaim a pure Gospel. He also demanded that Paul's motives be pure.

That is why the great missionary mentioned some of the practices he strenuously avoided as he served his Savior.

***For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts. Verses 3-4***

Paul was careful how he shared the Gospel. He never used pressure tactics or deceptive devices to draw people to trust in Jesus.

***For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God. 2 Corinthians 2:17***

Even today, some preachers proclaim salvation like peddlers. They use all sorts of deceptive devices. Like sleazy salesmen, they offer anything to make a sale. And they all do so for the same reason.

They crave success, to be honored and appreciated. But such a selfish motive is so out of step with our sincere and straightforward Savior, it disallows us from serving Him.

***For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. Galatians 1:10***

Paul always understood the God he served examined his heart. And the Lord demands that His servants serve selflessly.

That is one reason why the great apostle was careful never to tailor his message to please those who heard him.

***For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness— Verse 5***

Many years ago, I spent a few minutes sharing some thoughts with a pastor who served a very large congregation. During that conversation, I expressed wonder that some preachers are so unscrupulous in the ways they raise money.

The pastor smiled and said the reason is simple. “There’s gold in them thar pews.”

It is more than merely tragic. But a great many people who claim to serve God are motivated by money and material wealth.

And that is both dark and deadly. In fact, our Savior said it is impossible to serve both God and money.

***No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. Luke 16:13 (ESV)***

Jewish converts at Thessalonica were forced to live in a pressure cooker world. While they had received Jesus as their Master and Messiah, they still had to live and work in a Jewish world.

And many of those unconverted Jews were hostile toward Jesus Christ. They continually condemned and criticized Paul, charging that he was a false teacher who proclaimed a message he dreamed up or heard from other false teachers.

They also accused him of seeking personal fame and trying to squeeze money from simple, sincere people. That is why Paul knew he had to be open and honest about his motives as God’s messenger.

And the one and only motive Paul had for suffering and sacrificing, for serving and speaking out for the Savior was love.

He was willing to endure pain and persecution because he loved Christ. And he kept both his message and his motives pure for the same reason. He loved the Lord Jesus.

That is the standard our Savior demands of all His servants. First, last and always we must love our Lord. If we do that, we will bear fruit. We may not see its full flowering.

But we can be sure the seed we sow will grow and bear fruit.