



# AS A MOTHER CARES FOR HER CHILDREN

SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

Second Message

Bernard Bell

March 29, 2020

We are in day 13 of Shelter-in-Place. Again, measures that seemed extreme two weeks ago are now normal as much of the world is locked down. These are difficult days. You cannot visit loved ones in hospitals, nursing homes or retirement communities. Grandparents can't see their grandkids. Many of you are fearful and anxious. You feel out of control. Buying toilet paper is one way of feeling in control, but now you can't find any. Uncertainty further intensifies the fear and anxiety. This is all understandable. These are very human responses to our current situation. Where do you turn in your anxiety and fear? Children turn to their Comforter-in-Chief, to mom or dad. They get up into their lap for tender, loving care, for soothing, reassuring words: "It's going to be alright."

We have recently updated the signage on our church campus. I love the graphic that Mickey Cook designed for the cry room, or Baby Zone as it's now called. The image of a mother cradling a baby in her arms conveys safety and security, nurture and care.

Children turn to their parents for loving and soothing care. But where can adults turn in their fear and anxiety? I recognize that some of you have troubled relationships with your parents, that they were and are not safe people for you. Sadly many people also view God this way: he is not a safe place. Instead of a lap into which you can climb you see a frowning face and a big stick. He's the last place to go for comfort. But I always heard my mother begin her prayers, "Our loving heavenly Father." Hearing this so many times shaped me. So I do indeed think of God as my loving heavenly Father, into whose lap I can climb. He's a God I can trust with myself and my future. So I can say,

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;  
He makes me down to lie  
In pastures green; He leadeth me  
The quiet waters by.

Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,  
Yet will I fear no ill;  
For Thou art with me, and Thy rod  
And staff me comfort still. (Ps 23:1-2, 4, *Scottish Psalter*)

But for some these are hollow words: you don't trust God.

Trust. An infant cradled in her mother's arms is a beautiful picture of trust. But trust is a difficult word at such a time as this. Whom can we trust? Which leaders are trustworthy? Who will tell us the truth? Which media is giving us the real news, not fake news? Which web sites can be trusted?

Karl Barth, the famous pastor and theologian, advised ministers to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. We recently gave up taking the newspaper, so now it's a news app in the other hand. Preachers seek to bridge the gap between the Scriptures and today. I felt this particularly strongly this week as I wrote the teaser for the e-bulletin on Wednesday. I had 1 Thessalonians open in front of me as I wrote, but it could have been the current

news. Most of the terms I used in the blurb come straight from today's Bible text but they ring just as true today as 2000 years ago.

I learnt two new terms this week: mental hygiene and sleep hygiene. We are learning to practice physical hygiene: by washing our hands for twenty seconds and doing so many times throughout the day. We are trying to not touch our face—this is hard! In the same way we need to practice mental hygiene. There are things we can do to prevent or counteract the fear, anxiety and stress that we feel. Exercise is good: we are still allowed out for that. Eat well. Sleep well by practicing sleep hygiene, limiting device use before we go to bed. And control our consumption of media, much of which makes us more anxious and stressed. There are many voices out there clamoring for our attention. Not all of these voices are benign. Some of the media does aim for the public good. But other media is driven by celebrities, sensationalism, shock-value and ultimately by profit. Which voices can we trust amid the clamor?

Let me add my voice briefly. It is going to be alright. But this does not mean it is going to be easy. We are still heading into the crisis; the worst is yet to come. But it is going to be alright, for two reasons. Firstly, our hope is in someone and something that cannot be shaken by this crisis. Just like the Thessalonian Christians, "we wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thess 1:10). Notice he doesn't rescue us from the present troubles. The second reason for hope is that God is at work. He is at work in us, making us more and more like Jesus. And he is at work through us; we have many opportunities to emulate the Thessalonians in our work produced by faith, our labor prompted by love, and our endurance inspired by hope. We have many opportunities to act like the Good Samaritan towards our neighbor.

But it is not going to be easy. Hopes will be crushed. But these are hopes placed in things which are not sufficiently robust to hold up under this crisis. People are dying. Tragically people are dying alone, family unable to be with them. Anyone who says it is going to be easy is lying. One of the reasons Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians was that some of them had recently died under opposition. Paul doesn't deny their suffering, but he reinforces their hope.

So, it is going to be alright, but it is not going to be easy. But I'm not asking you to trust me. I'm asking you to trust God and his Word. He is with us and he is at work even now.

In the middle of the first century a new voice arrived in Thessalonica, one proclaiming the gospel of God. Paul proclaimed to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah, and he proclaimed to the Romans that there is another king, one called Jesus. But Paul was just one of many voices. Some voices were itinerant speakers, traveling from city to city. Others remained in one place, teaching in a settled environment. The more philosophically-minded voices sought to inspire their students and hearers to a higher life, a well-considered life, a nobler life. But there were other voices, especially the itinerant

teachers, who were self-serving, speaking out of less than pure motives. There were plenty of hucksters and shysters, quacks and hacks, charlatans and frauds, con-artists and scam-artists. Unfortunately these voices have not gone away. Today they flourish in the media, online, in leadership, and, sadly, even in churches. The cynical public might say that they flourish *especially* in churches.

Was Paul one of these voices? Was he trustworthy? Were his words true? Or was he a fraud? In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul feels the need to defend himself and his voice, to differentiate himself from all the false voices.

We saw last week that Paul had sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how the fledgling church was doing. Timothy brought back good news about their faith and love. But he also brought back some troubling news. The Thessalonian Christians were facing opposition and trouble; they were suffering. This was to be expected because Paul had experienced the same when he was in the city, and he had warned them this would continue. It seems that part of this opposition took the form of non-Christians questioning Paul's motives and integrity, suggesting to the church that Paul was motivated only by self-interest. Having deceived and manipulated them, he had now skipped town, never to be seen again. He was a fraud. If this was indeed what was being said, then Paul was relieved to hear Timothy's report that "you have pleasant memories of us and long to see us" (3:6). So far they are not succumbing to all the doubts cast by the opponents. But in his letter to them, Paul takes the time to address the challenge. After his lengthy and profuse thanksgiving in chapter 1, he gives a defense of how he behaved when he was among them in Thessalonica before he had to leave town abruptly at night. He gives a defense of his voice, that it is a trustworthy voice.

First Paul describes how he did not behave; he contrasts his voice to all the other voices out there (2:1-7a). Then he moves on to how he did behave; why his voice can be considered trustworthy (2:7b-12). We can learn a lot here about how Christians in any sort of leadership should and should not behave. This isn't just for pastors and ministers, but also for small group leaders, for those who work with youth and children, and others. What we see here is also valuable for secular leadership, and is especially pertinent to our current situation.

## I. How Paul did not Behave (2:1-7a)

The first part of Paul's defense is to describe how he did not behave when he was present with the Thessalonian Christians. I invite you at home to read along with me.

**You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. Instead, we were like young children among you. (1 Thess 2:1-7a NIV)**

Repeatedly Paul urges the Christians to think back and remember his time in Thessalonica: "you know...you know...you know." They know that he had suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, where he and Silas had been beaten and thrown in jail. *But* that did not deter him from continuing to preach the gospel in the next city, their city. He had the courage to proclaim the good news to them also, even in the face of strong opposition. How did he have this courage? How, having suffered such outrageous treatment in Philippi, could he stand up in Thessalonica and proclaim the good news? Because of God. Since it was the gospel of God that he was proclaiming, God gave him the courage to do so. And this preaching was not in vain: the Thessalonians had responded to the good news and a church was born. It's a very young church, only a few months old when Paul writes this letter.

Next Paul defends his voice; he defends the motives behind his gospel appeal. He contrasts himself and the false voices: "not...nor...nor... but" (3-4). On the negative side he lists three characteristics of the false voices: error, impure motives, trickery.

Paul's appeal did *not* spring from error. False voices do speak error. Some speakers are themselves deluded and believe the errors they spread. They may be sincere but they are misguided. Other false voices know that they are peddling falsehoods; they are frauds driven by a motive other than the truth, whether profit or fame. And for some speakers it's hard to tell whether or not they believe the nonsense they spout. Paul was neither delusional nor peddling delusions when he preached the gospel.

*Nor* did Paul have impure motives. What multitude of devious devices are covered by this blanket statement of impure motives! There are people seeking to expose the impure motives of politicians, media, and, sadly, Christian leaders.

*Nor* did Paul use trickery. The word here was originally used to describe fish bait. You know how this works! A bright shiny object or a tasty tidbit is dangled in front of the fish. The fish takes the bait but it's the classic bait-and-switch! The fish is hooked. Clickbait on the internet works the same way. Part of practicing mental hygiene is to be alert to such practices. Part of wisdom is being able to discern the hook hidden within the bait.

*On the contrary*, Paul spoke as one "approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel." He knew that he was entrusted with a precious treasure, and was answerable to God for what he did with this treasure. Here he makes a second contrast: he was seeking to please *not* people *but* God (4b). The world is full of people-pleasers. Many speakers simply want to please and entertain the crowd. But Paul sought to be a God-pleaser. God sees deep into our hearts; he knows our motives. Paul wanted to please God, who one day would say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. In you I am well pleased."

Paul gives a third set of contrasts, again using a "not...nor...nor... but" construction (5-7a). Again he lists a triplet of false motives. The false voices use flattery, mask their greed, and seek human praise.

They use flattering words. They're not interested in the truth, just in people's response to them. They speak to those who want to have their itching ears tickled (2 Tim 4:3).

The public persona of these false voices is fake; it's just a mask hiding the underlying greed, whether for money, praise or fame. Again, the internet is full of such speech and such people. Websites seek eyeballs: they want viewers, the more the better, and however they

attract the eyeballs doesn't matter. Clickbait is a pretense. Sensational headlines are a pretense.

Thirdly, the false voices are looking for human praise. They want people to like them. Energized by the praise and adulation of the crowd, they say whatever will generate this. They surround themselves with sycophants who praise their every word.

But Paul was secure in God, knowing that he was answerable to God alone. Therefore he didn't have to look to people for approval. He could have demanded praise and approval. He and Silas were apostles of Christ. They could have pulled rank. They could have thrown their weight around. They could have insisted on privileges befitting their station. Too many leaders, Christian or otherwise, do so. I am grateful that I came to PBC while Ray Stedman was still there. People used to come to Palo Alto on a Sunday morning to see the Big Man. I was asked once to point him out. The visitor was obviously having trouble spotting the Big Man. Looking around the auditorium, there was no obvious candidate. So I pointed out Ray. He looked just like a regular member of the congregation, wearing his old pale blue cardigan. Nothing to distinguish himself as the Big Man! Ray was a humble man. He did not throw his weight around; he did not pull rank.

Paul has defended his proclamation of the gospel against charges of insincerity, delusion, impure motives, trickery, flattery, hidden greed, and pursuit of human praise. But what was he actually like among the Thessalonians? He says of himself and Silas, "Instead, we were like young children among you." The metaphor of infants could be used a number of ways. Here I think Paul is implying innocence. They were innocent of the scheming manipulations of the false voices. An infant or young child has not yet learnt the devious games that adults play!

## 2. How Paul did Behave (2:7b-12)

Having defended himself by describing how he did not behave, Paul moves on to describe how he and Silas did behave.

**Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. (2:7b-12)**

Paul did not seek to take advantage of the Thessalonians. Instead, he likens himself to both a mother and a father. "Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you." Wet nurses were common in the Roman world and the resulting attachment was often stronger than the maternal bond. Some of my fellow missionary kids had an *amah*, with whom they became more bonded than with their busy mother. A wet nurse literally gives of herself to the child of another. How much more care therefore would she give to her own children. Maternal instinct is a caring, compassionate instinct. Indeed, the Hebrew word for compassion is derived from the word for "womb." Paul and Silas had become attached to these Christians; they were full of affection for them. Therefore, they were delighted

to share with them not only the gospel but also their very selves, to give of themselves self-sacrificially.

They gave of themselves in toil and hardship to pay their own keep. They could have pulled rank as apostles, expecting the church to support them. But they worked to provide their own support. Presumably Paul worked as a leather-worker, as he was perhaps already doing in Corinth when he wrote this letter. In both cities, his workshop would have been his primary venue for evangelism and discipleship, for sharing the good news and nurturing the young Christians.

Paul also compares himself to a father with his children, using another triplet of words: encouraging, comforting and urging. Encourage and comfort are verbs of empathy. A loving parent shows empathy towards his or her children. Paul understood the situation in Thessalonica. The young Christians were facing opposition. He understood because he too had faced that opposition in Thessalonica, and not for the first time. Therefore, he could empathize because he had been there before. In a time of crisis like this, we look to our leaders for empathy. We want some word of encouragement, comfort and hope amidst all the bad news.

Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, died at the beginning of this month. We don't associate him with compassion and empathy. But he represents a past generation of CEOs. Empathy is now in vogue among executives. Leaders are expected to have emotional intelligence. EQ is as important as IQ.

But empathy alone is not enough. As a father to his children, Paul also gave direction: "urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory." A good father has aspirations for his children. Sometimes these might be the father's own failed aspirations, which is a terrible burden to place on a child. Paul had aspirations for the Thessalonians: that amidst their suffering and the opposition they live into what they really are, God's people. God has called them into his kingdom to live differently, to live life the Jesus Way. God has aspirations for us in this time of crisis.

A word here to those of you who work with our young ones, whether children, Middle School or High School, and also to school teachers. You have a very important role in the lives of your charges. You can no longer meet in person, but modern technology allows you to stay connected. I'm delighted to see the Sunday Morning Family Resources on the PBCC website under Children's Ministry. Children and youth are at an impressionable age. You have the privilege of helping to nurture them, supplementing but not replacing their parents. You can provide an empathetic leadership, encouraging and comforting, but also an aspirational leadership, directing them towards a well-considered life, a life lived for God in Christ through his Spirit. Thank you for being a safe and trustworthy place for your students and youth.

At the age of 12 my mother was invited to join a group of girls who met weekly in a church with a deaconess, Miss Smith. She also joined Christian Endeavour, the forerunner of modern youth ministry. Her group leader was Agnes Grey. She left school the week she turned 15 and went to work, but continued in both these groups. She talked about these two women for the rest of her life—for 75 years! So I grew up knowing the names of my mother's two youth group leaders. This is a tremendous legacy. As a nursing mother cares for her children, so these two single women cared for my mother whose own mother was unable to care. Not only did they care and nurture, they also inspired their young girls to participate in ministry.

We have many faithful ministry leaders who have left and are leaving a great legacy, serving in Sunday School, with Middle School and with High School. Thank you all.

### 3. Imitating Jesus (2:13-16)

Paul is so overjoyed at how the Thessalonians have flourished under his maternal care and paternal empathy and inspiration that he bursts into thanksgiving again:

**And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last. (2:13-16)**

God's word is at work in these believers, shaping and transforming them. The evidence of this transformation is how they are responding to their current difficulties, to opposition and suffering. Paul returns to the language of imitation that he used in chapter 1. Previously he praised them: "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit" (1:6). Now he praises them for imitating the churches in Judea. I'm sure they wished they weren't imitating those Judean churches, for they were suffering at the hands of their fellow Jews, even unto death. And those churches were replicating the suffering of the Lord Jesus, who also had suffered unto death. I'm sure Paul would say to them, "It won't be easy, but it will be alright." As for those persecuting them, God will deal with them in his own good time; leave it to him. Meanwhile their suffering will continue and more may die. But God is present with them in Christ through his Spirit. He is at work in them and through them.

I cannot promise you that this coronavirus crisis will quickly be over. It is going to get worse. What I can say is, "It won't be easy, but it will be alright." God knows this. He has not forgotten us. When his people thought he had forgotten he reassured them,

**"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast  
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?  
Though she may forget,  
I will not forget you!" (Isa 49:15)**

His eyes, ears and heart are open to his people. He sees, hears, and feels our condition. He can be trusted. He is "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Cor 1:3). And he has aspirations for us: that we live into the opportunities of this time as his people empowered by his Spirit to live the Jesus Way: loving God and loving neighbor. May we be generous with our loving care, loving our neighbor as did the Good Samaritan.

Let us close with the *Prayer for Generosity*:

Lord, teach us to be generous,  
to serve you as you deserve,  
to give and not to count the cost,  
to fight and not to heed the wounds,  
to toil and not to seek for rest,  
to labour and not to look for any reward,  
save that of knowing that we do your holy will.<sup>1</sup>

*Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. (2 Thess 3:16)*

1. Frequently attributed to Ignatius of Loyola (16th century), but probably written in the late 19th century.