

November 25 – Thanksgiving Eve

Hymns: 609, 533, 615; Gospel: Luke 7:36-50

Living includes more than breathing. Bad times can make us pull inward, lose confidence, become afraid, feel sorry for ourselves, and find no cause for giving thanks. We are not alone when a cloud seems to hang over us. The Apostle Paul was going through something like that—until the cloud dispersed. Good news had arrived, for which he could not find words enough to thank God. We read 1 Thessalonians 3:7-13.

⁷ Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. ⁸ For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. ⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?

¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³ May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Did you notice what the Apostle Paul said when he heard that the Thessalonian Christians had not given in to persecution, that they still believed in and followed their Savior Jesus Christ? He said, *“For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord”* (v. 8). In fact, the words Paul used in his language seem even stranger. He said, *noon Zoh’men* (νῦν ζῶμεν): *“Now we live.”*

What does Paul mean? Of course, he has been physically alive. Clearly, he has not lost his faith in Christ. It appears that emotionally he was dying a slow death in his anxiety over his beloved and persecuted Thessalonians. When he hears they are standing firm in the face of persecution, he feels renewed energy, renewed confidence. He lives knowing they live. **“We live!”**

“Thank God!

The past months had been exceptionally hard for Paul. During this second mission journey God had led him to cross the Aegean Sea to Macedonia and Greece where much of the population was Roman and Greek and Jews were less numerous. But even in this part of the Roman Empire Jews did form synagogues; and as had been his practice, Paul continued to go to the synagogue in each town to tell the Jews that their long-awaited Savior had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Some believed, but many did not. After listening to Paul for a while most of the Jews rejected his message and cast him out of their synagogue. A smaller number of Jews did accept Jesus as the promised Savior. They gathered in households with non-Jewish people who also accepted the good news. Christian congregations were forming.

So where are the hard times you ask? Those who rejected Paul’s preaching accused him of crime before the Roman officials. They forced Paul to leave the northern cities, like Thessalonica. He went south to Athens.

The opposition continued. The Greek philosophers in Athens rejected the good news about Jesus Christ. The synagogue also rejected his message. A few believed but not many. Paul then headed west to Corinth. There again, some believed, others rejected the good news and tried to have Paul arrested.

During these turbulent months, a Christian church is growing in Greece despite the persecution and rejection. Paul will stay in Corinth for 18 months—a long time for the missionary

work he was doing. But what about the churches in the north? What about the Christians in Thessalonica? Had they surrendered to persecution? Had they turned away from Christ?

Paul was dying to know. He was dying in an emotional sense. He was wondering whether any church could survive in the face of intense persecution.

Then Paul's young coworker comes from Thessalonica; he has good news! Fantastic news! The young congregation in Thessalonica is standing firm. They have not surrendered to persecution.

Paul's anxiety dissipates like the morning mist. He feels new energy, new confidence, new life. He lives to keep preaching Christ. The Thessalonian Christians live to preach Christ. And so he exclaims, "We live!" *"How can we thank God enough for you [Thessalonian Christians] in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?"* (v 9)

Anxiety and the year 2020 go together in the minds of countless people. Pandemic, Covid-19, ICU, masks, isolation, business closures, unemployment...and the list of reasons for anxiety grows. Some turn to Christ and Christian churches, others blame Christians. It feels like a dark cloud hangs over us. We can empathize with the Apostle Paul. We know Christ lives, we know our lives are in his hands, but we wonder about the future, if not about ourselves then whether our brothers and sisters in Christ are standing firm.

We see each other less in person. We do not have a fulltime pastor right now. The future may feel uncertain. But we are not alone. Jesus promised to be with us, his disciples, until he comes again. He promised that he is present whenever we gather in his name, even if a gathering counts two or three people. God will not leave us or forsake us.

God is present in his Word, the Bible. The Jewish Christians that gathered with the Christians had the Old Testament. Through the Apostles they were learning how the Scriptures prophesied the coming of the Savior, how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies and how believers in the true God have always depended on his grace and mercy for forgiveness and salvation.

Now the Apostle Paul was sending them a letter. This letter, the one we call First Thessalonians, may well have been the first of thirteen letters the apostle would send to various congregations and coworkers. The New Testament is taking form. The Roman Empire with its roads and security had encouraged people to communicate over distance through letters. The Christians are using this new form of communication. Though separated by distance, they can still communicate.

Physical presence at our church building has been limited this year. But we have been learning to use new ways to communicate, through Facebook, websites, recorded services on YouTube. Text messages are shared. Devotions, prayers, and words of encouragement spread among us.

We live! By the grace of God, we live. And as the Apostle Paul could not find words enough to thank God for holding onto the Christians in Thessalonica and keeping himself firm as well, so it is hard for us to express fully our gratitude for what God still does. We live!

The fact that we live means we have a future. Not only in heaven, but here and now. That future on earth may endure only days, or months, or it might stretch out years. Regardless, the fact that we live, leads us to pray!

Pray!

The Apostle Paul was praying for the Christians in Thessalonica *"night and day"* (v 10). He was praying for them *"earnestly"* (v 10), fervently, and intensively. He prayed that God would allow him to see these Christians again and *supply what is lacking in their faith* (v 10).

The letters, gospel histories and the Acts of the Apostles were not the only writings appearing among the Christians. Some tried to make the mystery of God made flesh understandable and thereby distorted what God revealed in Christ. Some wrote fanciful stories about Jesus' childhood. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and John they did not report what they had seen or what Luke

had obtained from eyewitnesses. The Christians needed to hold onto the true, God-given teaching of the Apostles sent by Christ and discard false teaching that would separate them from Christ.

New Christians also needed to grow in their understanding of what God was teaching them in the Old Testament. They needed to learn more fully how following Jesus would affect the way they lived. Some of this could be done through letters, which would leave clear, specific teaching that the Christians could refer to again and again. Personal visits would also help greatly. Questions could be answered, specific situations could be addressed in person. And so, Paul prayed fervently that God would *clear the way for him to come and visit the Thessalonians* (v 11).

He prayed also that their *love would increase and overflow for each other and everyone else, even as his love overflowed for them* (v 12). He prayed for them with an eye to eternity. He prayed that they would remain children of God through faith in their Savior so that his obedience covered their disobedience, so that, wearing the righteousness of Jesus Christ, they would be *“found blameless and holy, when the Lord comes again”* (v 13).

Not all communication over the Internet on cellphones and computers strengthens our faith in Christ. Not all those messages encourage us to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. There are many false, destructive messages about Christ. Many words are hateful and inspire resentment.

We need a pastor who swears allegiance to the inspired Word of God and acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions because they rightly state what that Word teaches. We need a pastor who calls us to daily repentance and directs us to the cross where our sins are forgiven. We need a pastor who supplies what is lacking in our faith and life in Christ.

Therefore, we join the Apostle Paul in his prayer. We pray that God would lead a pastor to accept our call to come and serve us. We pray that God will clear the path so that we can gather again in person to worship together, learn together, and encourage each other here at church. We pray that God will cause our love for each other to increase so that we help the brother or sister who needs our assistance. We pray that God keeps us faithful so that covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ, *we are found blameless and holy when our Savior comes again with his holy angels*. We pray this knowing that because of God’s grace in Christ, **“we live!”** Amen.