

INTRODUCTION

Paul's first letter to church at Thessalonica was full of encouragement to be ready for the return of Christ. He reassured them that their loved ones who died won't miss the big event—they'll actually be the first act!

Most scholars think there is less than a year between the first letter and the second one. Between the two letters, the persecution against the believers had intensified. And apparently, someone had even faked a letter from Paul claiming Jesus had already returned. Paul corrected in the second chapter: "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come." (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2)

Some of the church members thought that the coming of Jesus was so close that they should quit their jobs and just wait. Paul had to correct that by saying, "If a man doesn't work, he shouldn't eat."

In this message, we're going to learn about the power of persistence. Diana Nyad is a remarkable woman. She's been a long distance swimmer for many years. At age 28 she tried to swim from Cuba to Florida. She tried again and failed. She failed a total of four times. Most people would have given up, but not her.

As you probably know, just a couple of weeks ago, she became the first person to swim that distance without a shark cage. But just a couple of weeks ago, she succeeded at age 64. She swam 110 miles through shark-infested waters battling stinging jellyfish for 53 hours of nonstop swimming.

When she stumbled ashore, she was exhausted, but she took the time to say, "I've got three messages. One is we should never give up. Two is you're never too old to chase your dreams; and three it looks like a solitary sport, but it's a team effort."

There is great power in persistence. Paul begins this second letter by encouraging the believers to persevere and persist in spite of the painful trials they were facing.

2 Thessalonians 1:1-5. "Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering."

I believe Satan's # 1 temptation for Christians isn't immorality, lying, or drug abuse. I think his most common temptation is to try to get you to give up on God. His very first temptation in the

Garden of Eden was to try to get Eve to give up on God's perfect plan. He whispered in her ear, "You can't trust what God says. Go ahead and stop believing Him. Do it your way."

Are you at a place where you feel like giving up on God? Are you giving in to the temptation to give up on yourself, on your dreams, on your commitment, on the Christian life? There is a great blessing in store for God's people who REFUSE to give up. There is great power in persistence.

As Paul begins this second letter, he addressed four areas of where we need to persevere and persist.

1. KEEP ON GATHERING WITH YOUR CHURCH!

He began his letter with these powerful words, "To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Many times, when we read one of Paul's letters we just skip over the beginning words to get to the meat of his message. But I want us to stop at the word "church" and camp out there for just a moment.

The word "church" is one of the most common words in the New Testament. It appears over 100 times. The first time it appears is in Matthew 16 where Jesus says, "Upon this rock I will build my church." (Matthew 16:18) The last time the word church appears is in the last page of our Bible where Jesus says, "Send this message to the churches, 'I am the Root and Offspring of David, and the Bright and Morning Star.'" (Revelation 22:16)

The Greek word for church is *ecclesia*. It literally means, "Called-out ones." Those of us who are part of Christ's church have been "called out of this world" to live a different kind of life.

Notice the language Paul used. What is the location of the church? It was the church OF the Thessalonians. In the same way we're part of the church OF the Tylerites. But the church is located IN God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

God is everywhere, but there is a special sense of His presence when His church gathers. In the Old Testament, when the priests offered the sacrifice in the Temple, the glory of God would fill the Temple. Today, God no longer has a Temple for His people; He has a people for His Temple. The Bible says, "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit." (1 Corinthians 6:19) That's true individually, but it's also true in a corporate sense. Jesus dwells in His Body, called the church.

When we meet together in His name, He promised to manifest Himself in a special way. He said, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20) Why did you come to church today? Out of habit? Did someone make you come? Did you want to hear the music or the message? I hope you came because you wanted to have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

The writer of Hebrews warns us that we should not forsake the wonderful practice of gathering with other believers. I've pointed out before that we have over 15,000 members on our rolls, and on any given Sunday, we have about 5,000 people in attendance. That means that two-thirds of the people who call themselves "Christian" don't care enough to even gather together with God's family. And that's not just Green Acres; it's true of almost every church in America.

As I travel around the world and visit places where spiritual awakening is happening, that trend is exactly reversed. In areas where the fire of God is falling, like the Philippines, the churches have one-third MORE people attend than they have members. The lack of interest in gathering together is a mark of how much we need a fresh wind and fresh fire from God in America.

More Americans worship the god of recreation on Sunday than worship the Creator. With apologies to King David here's a psalm to the god of recreation. "Recreation is my shepherd, I shall not worship. It maketh me lie down in a sleeping bag; it leadeth me down the Interstate each week. It restoreth my suntan; it leadeth me to state parks for comfort's sake. Even though I stray on the Lord's Day, I will fear no reprimand; for I am relaxed; My rod and reel they comfort me. I anoint my skin with SPF30; My gas tank runneth dry; Surely my trailer will follow me all the weekends of summer, and I shall return to the Lord's house this fall. But by then it will be hunting and football season ..."

But those so-called Christians who have given up on gathering with the church, aren't here. So I can't talk to them. I can only say to you, "Good for you for gathering here today. Keep on doing it! There's great power in persistence. Keep on gathering. Keep on worshipping. Keep on encouraging one another. Keep on believing God! Don't quit! Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you a car. But if you love Jesus, you will love gathering with His people on a regular basis.

2. KEEP ON GROWING IN YOUR FAITH!

"Your faith is growing more and more." After his introduction, Paul mentions three things about these believers that make him thankful. He was thankful that they were growing in faith, in love, and in perseverance. Not only were they persisting with their meeting together, Paul pointed out that there was growth in their faith. The word used for faith here is often translated, "faithfulness."

This is a good place for you to stop and ask yourself seriously, "Am I growing as a Christian? Am I becoming more and more mature in my faith?" Spiritual immaturity was a problem with the early church and it's a problem today.

Theologian F. F. Bosworth wrote: "Most Christians feed their body three hot meals a day and their spirit one cold snack a week. And they wonder why they're so weak in faith."

When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth he chided them for their immaturity. "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly." (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)

When parents bring a newborn baby home, every oohs and ahs about the beautiful little bundle of joy. But if that baby doesn't grow, then the parents know something is wrong. In the same way, when we first come to Christ, there is a time when we are spiritual infants. But we can't stay there; we must grow in our faith.

There is a paradox in the Christian life about the analogy of a child. Jesus told the disciples that unless they become as little children, they could not enter the kingdom heaven. Yet Paul writes that we cannot remain as children, we must grow up in our faith.

It's the difference between these two words: Childlike and childish. We must have a simple, childlike faith and trust in God. But we should mature beyond the childish attitudes of selfishness and self-centeredness.

Faith is like a muscle. The more you exercise faith, the more it grows. Through the years, I've been blessed by reading the biographies of great men of faith like George Müller and Hudson Taylor. Hudson Taylor started the Inland China Mission completely by faith. The work was difficult, and living conditions were sometimes very hard. Hudson Taylor struggled with illness and poverty. He didn't believe in appealing for people for financial support. He only appealed to God. He refused to take a salary, and lived by faith. At one low point in his life he wrote these words in his journal, "I cannot read; I cannot think; I cannot even pray; but I can trust because God is faithful."

There are times when you might get to a point where you find it hard to read, think, or even pray—but you can still trust God; because He IS faithful. Are you growing in your faith?

3. KEEP ON SHOWING YOUR LOVE!

"The love all of you have for one another is increasing." Not only did Paul thank God for their growth in faith, He was thankful for how their love was increasing.

Some people call 1 Corinthians 13 the love chapter, but 1 John 4 is really the love chapter. The word "love" appears eleven times in 1 Corinthians 13, but it appears twenty-four times in 1 John 4. John writes, "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister." (1 John 4:19-21)

In this letter, John made three definitive statements about God. He wrote that God is Spirit; God is Light; and God is Love. The Bible doesn't say, "Love is God." It says, "God is love." In other words, love doesn't define God; God defines love. Have you ever heard someone say, "I just don't believe a loving God could ever send anyone to hell?" They have some sentimental, human idea of love, and they try to impose their definition on God.

God loves you with an unconditional love. He loved us while we were sinners, and sent His Son to demonstrate His love. His love demands a response. We love Him because He loved us first. John wrote that you couldn't say that you love God if you don't love your brothers and sisters. He used strong language. If you claim to love God, but don't love others, then he calls you a liar.

Jim Cymbala is the pastor of Brooklyn Tabernacle Church. He tells the story of how one Easter Sunday evening after services, people were milling around. He was tired and depleted from a day of preaching. A poor homeless man approached him, obviously a wino. Jim's said his first reaction was, "Where are all my staff members to keep people like this away from me? He probably just wants some money to buy more cheap wine." Jim said the man smelled so bad that he had to turn his head away to take a breath. He found out the man's name was David and that he was sleeping on the streets. So Jim pulled out his money clip and he was going to offer him a few dollars and send him away.

But to his surprise, David said, "I don't want your money. I want your Jesus. I heard you talking about him tonight, and if I don't find Jesus, I'm going to die on the streets."

Jim said God convicted him on the spot. He began to weep and he suddenly grabbed David and hugged him. He said it was as if God said, "You don't like this smell? I love this man and his smell, and so should you." Jim said that in that moment his odor became as a sweet aroma.

Jim told him about Jesus and they prayed. He helped him get into a sixty-day detox program, and then found him a place to live. They hired him to do maintenance job at the church. David gave life to the Lord and began to memorize scripture. A year later David shared his testimony in church, and it was obvious God had called and gifted him to preach. They ordained him and today he is an associate pastor in a church in New Jersey. Jim Cymbala says that God sent him David to show him that people don't just need a handout—they need our love.

God is going to send people into your life who need your love. Will you demonstrate your love for them? Don't give up. Don't stop loving. Keep on persisting and growing in your love for others.

4. KEEP ON ENDURING YOUR TRIALS!

Paul wrote, "Among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring."

Three of the most valuable Christian virtues are faith, hope, and love. You can see all three here in this passage. Faith reaches upward to God in response to His grace; Love reaches outward to others in response to God's grace; Hope reaches forward into the future to trust God regardless of the circumstances. Perseverance is another word for spiritual stamina. Stamina is the ability to keep on going even when you're tired.

In life, we are going to experience painful trials. You can't avoid them. We often have no control over our circumstances. The only thing we have control over is how we *react* to painful circumstances.

James was Jesus' half-brother. They had the same mother, Mary, but different dads. Jesus was the Son of God and James was the son of Joseph. James was the pastor of the first church in Jerusalem. The believers were facing persecution and trials. James wrote, "Consider it pure joy,

my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." (James 1:2-3)

In the King James Version it says, "Count it all joy." James used a financial word used in accounting. Accountants understand a profit and loss statement. You list all your assets on one side and all your liabilities on the other side. The Bible says you can write down in the loss column, death, sickness, sadness, disappointment, rejection, pain, and adversity. But you can take a pen and write, "Joy" over it all. Faith in God can turn your liabilities into assets.

Most young people today don't use much cash or even know how to write a check. It's all plastic or digital. But most of you understand what it is to get a bill in the mail, or to get a check in the mail. You pay the bill, and you cash the check. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could cash your bills? I mean, you get an electric bill in the mail for \$250 and instead of paying it; you turn that bill over and endorse it. You take it to the bank, and they give you \$250 cash. How'd you like to be able to do that? That's exactly what the Bible says we can do when comes to adversity and pain. If we rejoice and persevere in our trials, God will turn it into our good. What we consider liabilities, God turns into assets.

When some people face adversity, it makes them bitter. But the Bible says we should rejoice because our trials make us better. There is great value in enduring trials with a smile. The Bible is full of people who could have been victims, but because of their faith they became victors. There is something to be said for the persistent attitude that says, "I won't give up. I won't quit. I'm not going to give in or give up."

In the book of Genesis, Joseph was hated by his brothers. They beat him up, sold him into slavery and then faked his death. Joseph was unfairly imprisoned in Egypt. His life was full of disappointment and adversity. But he refused to give in to bitterness. He never gave up on God. As he looked back on his life he said, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:20)

From my study of the U.S. Presidents, one of my favorites was Calvin Coolidge. He believed in a small government that didn't interfere in the lives of Americans. He was nicknamed "silent Cal." He once said, "I've never gotten into trouble for something I didn't say." But when he did speak, what he said was profound. Here's what he said about persistence. "Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan 'PRESS ON' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race."

CONCLUSION

Years ago I heard a parable illustrating persistence. One day a farmer's old donkey fell into an abandoned well. The donkey started making a racket from the well. He was heehawing up a storm.

When the farmer found him, he had no idea how to get him out of the well. Since the donkey was old and crippled, and the well needed to be covered up, he figured the best thing to do would be to just bury the old donkey in the well.

He invited some of his neighbors over to help him. They all grabbed a shovel and started digging and shoveling dirt into the well. At first the donkey cried out in protest, but soon, the old donkey quieted down. And he refused to give up.

After a few minutes, the farmer looked down into the well and was amazed at what he saw. For every shovel-fill of dirt that was tossed on his head, the old donkey would shake off the dirt and step up on the dirt. As they continued to fill up the well, the donkey continued to shake off the dirt and step up. Pretty soon the dirt level reached the edge of the well and the old donkey stepped over the ledge of the well and trotted off heehawing and leaping for joy.

Here's the lesson we learn from the persistent donkey. "In this life, you'll have lots of dirt shoveled on you. The key to surviving is to shake it off and step on top of it. God can turn your adversity into advance if you DO NOT GIVE UP!"

The Bible says, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." (Galatians 6:9)

So don't give up. Don't quit. Keep on persevering to the end. There is great power in persistence. Remember, Satan wants you to give up and quit. But God wants you to keep on keeping on in Jesus name! Enduring painful trials with joy isn't just a suggestion; it is a necessity. Yesterday we had Karen DeLeon's memorial service. She was one of my heroes, as are most missionaries. Over the course of forty years, she and Richard served faithfully in the U.S., South America, and North Africa. Karen battled cancer for thirteen years. But she never lost her positive attitude or her joy in the Lord. Let me read to you her own words about her cancer few months ago: "We will not allow this new cancer to steal our Joy in the Lord. So whether we have plenty or nothing; good health or sickness; cancer-free or cancer-filled we continue to rejoice in our relationship with Jesus Christ."

She had a smile to the end, and her last words were, "Lord Jesus, take me home. Take me home." And moments later He did. That's the power of a persistent faith.

OUTLINE

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David O. Dykes, Pastor
Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes