



Let's Get Ready to Rapture

First Thessalonians 3:6-13

"We Are Fam-a-lee"

Aging, nearing the end of his earthly life, the apostle John said,

3Jn 1:4 I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.

That's quite a statement. I would have guessed he'd say that Jesus gave him his greatest joy, e.g., spending time with The Lord in his devotions, or some other such thing.

Yet somehow, without diminishing the joy he found in Jesus or the joy of His salvation, John unashamedly said the thing that gave him the greatest joy was to hear a report that his spiritual children - those he had either led to faith in Jesus or had shepherded - were continuing to walk in the truth.

In our text, in First Thessalonians, the apostle Paul was anxiously awaiting a report from Timothy regarding the spiritual state of the church there Thessalonica. Hearing a good report he said,

1Th 3:8 For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.

1Th 3:9 For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God,

Again I'd have to say that those words are surprising and stunning. Paul's life and joy were wrapped up in the fellowship of believers.

What is it about the fellowship of believers that allowed John and Paul to say such things?

Perhaps something Jesus once said can shed some light on their fervor.

Mat 12:46 While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him.

Mat 12:47 Then one said to Him, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You."

Mat 12:48 But He answered and said to the one who told Him, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?"

Mat 12:49 And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers!

Mat 12:50 For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother."

It is true we can't choose our family. But the Lord did. If you believe on Him whom the Father has sent, He embraces you as His family. Hebrews says He is not ashamed to call us brethren (Hebrews 2:11). He says, "Behold, My brothers, My sisters, My mother - those who hear My word, those who do the will of the Father, believing in Me - they are My family."

I loved my dad; I love my mom; I love my brothers. But there is a sense in which even an unknown believer is more my family than they are.

Here's another thought. Regarding your earthly family, which you love, isn't your greatest concern that they each be saved? That they become part of the eternal family?

I've heard it said that nothing can rob us of our joy. Well, that's partly true. The joy we have in Jesus and the joy of our salvation - those cannot be robbed from us. It would seem, however, that when Christians fall away that our joy **can** be affected.

Paul was genuinely anxious about the condition of the family he had birthed through preaching the Gospel but was forced to leave behind.

1Th 3:6 But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you -

Timothy met up with Paul in Corinth. He was able to give him a good report about the church in Thessalonica.

Paul used the words "good news" to describe the report, which in the Greek is *evangelize*. It's the only place in the New Testament it is used of anything other than preaching the Gospel. Their favorable spiritual condition was like a Gospel to Paul; it was Good News about the Good News.

They were a people of "faith" toward God which incited "love" towards mankind. It's shorthand for saying they were doing great.

1Th 3:7 therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith

Just knowing that the Thessalonians were walking with The Lord comforted Paul in his sufferings. They didn't need to do anything, or send anything. Their steadfastness was all the comfort he needed.

It challenges my thoughts about comfort and about comforting others. I always think something needs to be done in order for comfort to be accomplished. Maybe comfort is far more supernatural than we have become accustomed to. I can be comforted by another believer's faithfulness; they don't have to do anything for me.

And I can be a comfort to other believers by simply standing fast in The Lord.

1Th 3:8 For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord

What an incredibly bold statement. Paul was indicating that he felt dead until he received the good news about them standing fast in The Lord.

Some of the commentators too quickly say that, at least for the minister, seeing converts continue in The Lord is an affirmation of their work. While there may be some truth to that, there are just too many ministers - even in the Bible - who had little outward success.

Jesus was one! After three and one half years of ministry, He was left with eleven disciples after the twelfth betrayed Him. Ten of

them abandoned Him at the Cross. On the Day of Pentecost there were a mere one hundred twenty people gathered.

Would Paul have thrown in the missionary towel if the report had been bad about them? Would it have nullified the truth of the Gospel? No and no.

I know that in my trials, in our trials, we look to believers who are standing fast and will encourage us to do the same. They really can't do anything to help us; the comfort comes from knowing they serve the same Jesus and are standing on the same ground as us.

1Th 3:9 For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God,

The Contemporary English Version says, "How can we possibly thank God enough for all the happiness you have brought us?"

There ought to be people in the body of Christ that you can turn to in your suffering, who just by being who they are in Christ comfort you so that you give thanks to God for them.

Or, how about this. Are **you** the person who by standing fast in Christ is at least available to be that comfort to others in their suffering?

1Th 3:10 night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith?

The situation in Thessalonica was somewhat unique in that Paul was run out of town after being with them for only three Sabbaths.

He had certainly taught them a lot; but there was so much more he wished to impart.

There's an insight here into spiritual warfare. Earlier in this letter Paul indicated that the devil was somehow hindering him from returning to Thessalonica. He met the opposition by "night and day praying exceedingly." We should do the same.

1Th 3:11 Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you.

Paul prayed as if it were up to him to affect God's heart. But he believed The Lord would direct his path. It's a great model to follow. Pray as if everything depended upon you; believed that everything depends upon God.

1Th 3:12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you,

In a church filled with love there was room to "increase and abound in love."

Where can **you** - where can **we** - "increase and abound in love," first to each other but then to "all" in our community?

"Just as we do to you" meant Paul was increasing and abounding in love in just the ways he was recommending to them. There's no retiring, no kicking back, and letting others do the increasing.

Here's a devotional question: When was you last increase in love?

1Th 3:13 so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

Wait. I thought Jesus was coming **for** His saints. The "saints" accompanying Christ at His coming are probably the souls of the saints who have departed this life and gone to be with Christ, whose bodies will be resurrected when He comes in the clouds for His church. The language is totally consistent with our understanding of the imminent rapture.

Every chapter mentions the return of Jesus for His church in the rapture. Right up until that very moment we should be growing in The Lord.

A good summary of our daily activities would be "establishing our hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father." If something I'm doing isn't contributing to that, I should at least question it, if not eliminate it.

You know, the world has its groups, its clubs, even its gangs, but none of them can hold a candle to the fellowship of believers.

That is, the fellowship of believers who would agree with Jesus and Paul and John about true family.