

<Read Text 1 Th 3:9-13>

Travel can be fun, it's a way many of us like to enjoy our vacation or retirement time. But travel can also be difficult and even incredibly stressful given the right set of circumstances. Sure there's the mode of travel, whether it all works out quite right and accommodations and such. But I think the key factor in how much these sort of things can affect us is familiarity. We are comfortable in our regular lives, in our day to day routine. In general, when something goes wrong, when we hit a problem, we know how to handle it. Why? Well because we know our surroundings. We know what resources are nearby to help and more importantly, we know people who can help as well. That can all be yanked out from under us pretty fast when we venture outside our comfort zone. We can be stranded in another state or even another country, hardly able to speak the local language, surrounded by nothing but complete strangers. Sometimes there's nothing for helping a stressful situation like a friendly face.

I bring this up because as comfortable as our daily lives may be, God wants us to remember that we are only strangers here in this world. This is not our homeland, this is not where we belong. And the rug can still be pulled out from under us as it were even here at "home", because this really isn't our home. Thankfully, though we wander as strangers in this world, we are not here alone. I wouldn't go so far as to say we take this blessing for granted, but I would say we probably don't treasure it like we ought to. This blessing of each other. We here are each part of a new land that we are waiting for. For each one of us, the Holy Spirit created faith in our hearts; through the washing of Baptism, through the power of the Word, we received a new citizenship. All our sins were washed clean in the blood of Jesus from his sacrifice on Calvary and we became God's treasured children.

The moment we became Christians, the moment we received faith in our God for salvation, we became strangers in a strange land here on earth. This new life was not created to stay here and so we came to realize that this is not our home. We are not making our home here, we are simply passing through this world on the way to our true home. This world is not where we belong. And because of that perspective, the way the Christian mind thinks is not how the world thinks. The wisdom of God; that our salvation is accomplished for us by a God who both hates sinner (us) and yet loves his creation (us); makes no sense to the "rational" minds of the world. And yet it makes perfect sense to a believer. We don't speak the same language or have the same worldview as those who live in this world. We are strangers in every sense.

Now, can you imagine what it would be like to be the only believer you know? Hopelessly outnumbered in a world that doesn't understand you and hates you for what you believe. Remember when the prophet Elijah felt that he was the last believer in all of Israel? He tried very hard for so long, but ultimately he felt utterly alone, and his response was "**I have had enough Lord, take my life.**" (1 Ki 19:4). How much better off are we for having each other.

So rejoice in each other! As Paul said, "**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?**" (v9). Paul was at a loss to thank God *enough* for all the joy one other congregation of believers brought him. Why shouldn't we rejoice as much in each other here? As believers we know what will happen to those who deny God. Everyone without Jesus will die. So how can we not be thankful to God for every person here who knows the truth and is saved by it? As grateful as we are for our own salvation, we can be just as thankful to God for every other person who comes to know his saving grace as well.

And though that would certainly be reason enough to be thankful, we can also rejoice in each other because each fellow believer is a personal blessing to us from God. Let me say that again to get it straight; each person here and each person you know who believes in Jesus is a blessing to you. Howso? To go back to our opening point; we understand each other. As strangers walking along the path of this world, we speak a strange language to the world when we speak about God. The world does not understand it, but we understand each other. Not in the sense of always knowing exactly what the other person is feeling or thinking but we know what we mean when we talk about God. We know that when the other person is hurting we can come to them with Jesus and his promises and we will be understood. We know that we have a like-mindedness about serving God's kingdom before our own interests.

And we are a blessing to each other because we are brothers and sisters. Family in the way that God intended it, not by birth but by the blood of God. Brothers and sisters who watch each other's backs. As we walk the long and dangerous road home to heaven we watch out for each other. When one of us struggles along the path, the rest of us are there to encourage. When one of us starts to fall behind the rest are there to help that person along. And when one of us starts to wander from the path, we are there in love to call that person back to the only road that leads to heaven.

As Paul said, **“Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.”** (v10). Every one of us here has our strengths and our weaknesses, but *together* we carry on. But that’s only when we’re working together. Only then can each of us supply what is lacking in the faith of the other. We are able to build each other up to withstand the attacks of Satan. If any of us insists on standing alone, we are severely weakened. On our own we’re subject to our individual weaknesses. When we’re left to our own devices and when we start to fall behind and let our devotion to God slip, there is no one to encourage us and catch us up. And when we start to wander from the path there is no one to call us back in love, no one to make us aware of the sins we’re committing. And so we rejoice with Paul in our fellow believers for all the blessings they provide us, so that we don’t have to wander this foreign land alone.

And again let me reinforce this point: I’m not just talking about the person sitting in the pew next to you here. I don’t just mean the people you came to church with today or the handful of people here that you know well. I’m talking about all believers here. Even when they’ve done something we think we should be upset about, even when maybe their personalities don’t quite mix with ours. Paul didn’t write “I thank God for all of you...with four exceptions, you guys know who you are.” No, Paul was thankful for every believer there. You can’t imagine that they were all perfectly nice and friendly with him. Certainly there had to be personality conflict, people there who didn’t always act in a Christian way. And yet Paul could honestly say he was grateful for them all.

In God’s eyes we all have the same worth and the same value and we need to treat each other as such. We need to fight against any urge to segregate within our own midst. We already have the devil and the world acting against us, it does none of us any good to fight amongst ourselves, especially when God gave us each other as blessings. As we walk along that path home it does us no good to break off into smaller groups, it’s far safer for all if we walk together.

But how do we fight against that? After all...it just seems to be in our nature to judge others, to want to set ourselves apart from people we find different or disagreeable. How do we stop ourselves from having that attitude? Paul writes, **“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other...”** (v12). Only God can give us that motivation. Only the Holy Spirit can move our hearts to see each other as God sees us. Each one of us is a valuable creation, bought at the price of the blood of Jesus. The Holy Spirit comes to us in the word and gives us a right heart that understands this truth. And it is the Holy Spirit that enables us to treat each other as the blessings God would have us be. To build each other up with encouragement rather than the tearing down of gossip or sarcasm or even mean teasing. To watch out for each other so that when one of us starts to fall there are ten others reaching out to catch that one. And simply to be a source of joy knowing that we are not alone in this world. Through all of this each of us will be strengthened in our faith so that when the Lord Jesus returns with all his holy ones we will be blameless and holy before him (v13).

Naturally, we don’t just stop with each other. We aren’t just content with knowing we’re saved and the rest of the world gets what it deserves. After all, we deserve that fate and would get it if it weren’t for the sacrifice of Jesus. Paul said, **“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.”** Much like we don’t want to fall into the trap of segregating ourselves within our group of believers, we don’t want to keep our group of believers separate from the rest of the world. It’s comforting to have each other, but we don’t want to stay in here with the doors closed forever and try to ignore the world. Rather in love we see the people outside our church and see what we used to be. We see people trapped in this world who don’t know the truth about Jesus and don’t know about their eternal destination.

Advent is a season with a double meaning. It’s a time to prepare for our celebration of Jesus’ first coming but to remember that we live during the advent of his second coming. And when Jesus returns those do not hold him as Lord in their hearts will not stand before him blameless and holy but rather they will stand condemned. And it is a senseless death. There is no need for it, the price has been paid already. And so we show our love to each other, that we may be built up in Christ for works of service, and as part of that work, we show our love to the world so that everyone possible may know there is no need to die for their sins any longer.

Jesus will come. It may be today, it may be tomorrow, it may not be during any of our lifetimes. But there will be a judgment when we all be judged. As we saw during our End Times season, you can either be judged on your actions, or by faith you can be judged on the actions of Christ. Only one of those ends well. That is why it is imperative for ourselves that we cling to his promise of forgiveness. If we let that fade away, if we stop trusting in him for salvation, we will have no defense when he stands to judge us. And we stand a much better chance of holding on if we walk together, instead of setting off on our own. And for the sake of those who do not know him, for the sake of those who have no defense, we work better together to bring the message of Jesus to the lost of the world.

So brothers and sisters, be there for each other. Use God’s Word to strengthen each other, and to give yourselves strength to watch for and help each other. Encourage your spiritual family to do the same. As Christians, we are strangers in a strange land, on our way to our heavenly home. But we are not alone. Amen.