

### YOUR NEW "CHURCH" YEAR RESOLUTION

<sup>9</sup> How can we thank God for you in return for all the joy we experience before our God because of you, <sup>10</sup> as we pray very earnestly night and day to see you face to face and to complete what is lacking in your faith?

<sup>11</sup> Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you. <sup>12</sup> And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone, just as we do for you. <sup>13</sup> May he make your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Amen.

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Today we begin a new church year as we begin the season of Advent. Advent means "coming," and we do spend this time getting ready to celebrate the first coming of Christ at Christmas. But you will notice that many of the readings during Advent talk about Judgment Day, when Christ will come again. Why? Well, it is like thunder and lightening. You can't have thunder if there was no lightening, and if there was a flash of lightening, it will naturally thunder. You can't have the one without the other. What good would it be for Christ to come again if he didn't come the first time? Then I would not have a place in God's heaven because Jesus didn't come the first time to offer his life to buy back or redeem me from my sins. And if he came only at Christmas and not a second time, what good would that be? I will not live in heaven without the resurrection from the dead.

I don't know about you, but I need Advent. I need to celebrate Christmas with the second coming of Christ in mind, and as I think of the second coming, I need to remember how the Son of God became flesh to be my Savior. So, let's start Advent and this new church year with a couple of new year resolutions. The first is to thank God for what he has done for us. Then let's ask God to supply what is lacking in our faith.

#### *I. Thank God for what he has made of you.*

A couple weeks ago I watched the Tom Hanks movie, *Apollo 13*. It is based on the real story of Apollo 13 that had a major explosion on its way to the moon. The crew and mission control did all they could to keep the crew alive and bring them home. One of the most intense moments was the time the command module was entering the earth's atmosphere. During that re-entry, there would be radio silence for three minutes. The three minutes came and went and when they tried to contact the crew, there was silence. Did they die in re-entry? Suddenly you heard their voices. They were alive and well.

That's how Paul felt when he wrote 1 Thessalonians. When Paul came to Thessalonica, he preached about Jesus Christ. Many believed, but many more grew angry. If Paul went from door to door selling encyclopedias, many would have slammed their doors in his face. There would be no city-wide riot. But Paul wasn't pushing books; he was preaching Christ crucified, a stumbling block and foolishness to many. A city-wide riot broke out and Paul had to flee for his life.

But what would happen to this small, young, fledgling congregation he left behind? Paul had only three weeks to teach them. Three weeks. Adults interested in our church take instruction for 16 weeks and young adults take three years of confirmation just to get the basics. Were the Thessalonians strong enough to survive the persecution? Weeks went by and there was no word. Paul confessed in this letter, **"When I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless."**

Finally, Paul got word. Yes, the congregation was persecuted; some members were thrown in jail. But they not only survived, they were growing. They went out to the surrounding towns and cities and spread the news about Jesus Christ. Paul was ecstatic. **"How can we thank God for you in return for all the joy we experience before our God because of you."** Why was Paul happy? Was the persecution over? No, it still went on. So why was he happy? Because they didn't lose their faith.

What is this hope that allows believers like the Thessalonians to endure even death if necessary? Just look at what God has done for you. We get all kinds of birds at our bird feeder: sparrows, finches, even a cardinal. When the grackles come by, we shoo them away. We don't want grackles eating at our bird feeder. What if God did the same? What if God chose only the desirable birds for his heaven? Then no one would be at his feeder because the world is nothing more than a world of unwanted, hated grackles. Just look at us. Last week we promised God we will amend our sinful lives and avoid temptation. Well, here we are. We committed them again. Yet how is it that can still come here in the presence of God? How is it we can still claim to be God's children and heirs of eternal life?

Listen to Paul's basic message he preached in Thessalonica as it is found in Acts 17, **"As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbaths he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,' he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women."** Jesus had to suffer and die and rise from the dead. There is no other way you or I or anyone can be saved. His death served as payment for our sins and his

resurrection shows we are forgiven. The grackle is invited to the feeder. God makes songbirds out of us grackles. Now that's grace. And it is ours through faith alone.

God gave us saving faith in Jesus. But Paul doesn't want us to settle for some faith. He wants that faith to grow. **"Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith."**

## *II. Ask God to supply what is lacking in your faith.*

Paul anxiously wanted to get back to Thessalonica. There was more he wanted to say and teach them. Does this mean there was something defective with their faith? No. Read through the whole letter. He addresses these Christians as ones who are going to heaven. They had plenty of saving faith. Remember what Jesus said, **"I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move."** It does NOT depend on how much faith you have in order to be saved. Saving faith is like a small pin. All it takes is one little prick of that pin and the whole balloon bursts. The smallest of faith receives everything Jesus does for us.

So why was Paul anxious to go back? Look at the Thessalonians. There were many in that church who did not grasp the resurrection from the dead and thus were living in fear and sadness. So Paul writes in chapter 4, **"Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope,"** and then he goes on to describe how their dead loved ones who believed in Jesus will rise. There were many in that church who were struggling in many ways, so Paul encouraged them to **". . . warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone."**

A child may fully know Christ and how he or she is going to heaven, but does this child know much about temptation and how to fight it? Confirmants understand the Real Presence of Christ's body and blood in Communion, but do they understand how God will work everything out for their good including terrible things like death and cancer? A young couple gets married right after college. Life looks promising and they are making more money than ever before, but do they really know what it means not to worry when bad days come?

How about you? Do you want to be more like Paul who praised God when God refused to remove his thorn in his flesh, or like Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his son because God told him to or like Stephen who wasn't afraid to die because he saw heaven opening before him? That's why Paul wanted to go back, to continue to share God's Word with them so that their saving faith will grow. And that is the key, isn't it, God's Word and Sacraments. Our faith began with the Bible and sacraments. It will grow with the Bible and Sacraments.

And with faith, love. **"And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone, just as we do for you."** Our world needs our love, especially in these last days when love is growing colder each day. We have more people to care for. Maybe you have to start parenting your parents. Money is tighter, life is stressful, society is becoming unraveled. Do you have enough love to go around? Ask God for an increase of love. Love is connected to faith and God's Word like a shadow is connected to the sun. If the sun shines brightly, the shadow is strong and long. If the sun is blocked or has set, there is no shadow.

Every year I give the confirmation class this goal, that they know the Bible a little more and are more trusting of God. Isn't that a good goal for all of us? As Paul states in our text, **"May he make your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."** God wants us in heaven. That is why Jesus came the first time as a lowly baby, to lay down his life for our sins. That is why he is coming a second time, to finally take us to heaven. Until then, let's make a new church year resolution. Let's resolve to use God's Word and Sacraments as often as possible so our faith is directed to Jesus and is growing. Let's also resolve that his love increases our love. Amen.