

2 THESSALONIANS 1:1-12  
SOMETHING TO BOAST ABOUT

How has church here changed in the last year? What's different about church from this time last year? Your first answers might all be to do with "we're all a year older and church is smaller" than this time last year. These seem to be the first answers that most people are giving when asked these questions about their church! Are there other answers? There is a more personal question: how have you changed in the last year? What's different about you now from this time last year? Then we can make that question a more pointed question: how has your faith changed in the last year? How has your faith grown in that time? Or is faith something you've had for 50 years and it is same now as it was in 1969?

We are looking today at Paul's second letter to the church in Thessalonica; that means there was a first letter! It seems that the second letter was written only six months after the first. In the first letter Paul gives thanks for this church and calls them a model church: they have copied Paul, who has copied Jesus; now others are copying them in the faith they have and in church life; they are a model church for others in that part of Greece. Six months later, Paul writes again and sees that they are different; maybe they are not much different, but different nonetheless and he thanks God for them. But he also knows that they are not perfect: they are not the finished article, so he ends by praying for them; there are things they need and so he prays that God will still be at work in them. Church is a work in progress! Is there something to boast about? Well, yes; there are good things about church life here and elsewhere, so we give thanks to God for His grace; let's boast about that! But we pray on, we work on; there is still more to be done; there is always more to be done!

Here is a growing church:

*"we always..."* (2 Thessalonians 1:3a) Growing faith might mean three things: first of all, it might be that they are learning more about Jesus and Christian faith; they are hearing more stories of Jesus; they are listening to more teaching about Jesus and about faith and what faith means; so they understand more; their understanding is deeper and so faith is growing. Secondly, they might believe more things – is there something about Christian faith that 10 years ago you were not sure about, but now you believe it quite firmly? Perhaps that was true of the Thessalonian Christians too, things that they were not clear about, but now they are sure and so they believe more things about Jesus; their faith is growing. Thirdly, perhaps they are more confident in their faith, perhaps because they know more and believe more; when someone asks them a question about their faith or challenges them to explain what they believe, they are more able to do that; faith is growing. It might even be a mix of all three of these; faith is growing!

*"the love..."* (2 Thessalonians 1:3b) how do you measure "love"? You can't score love! But you can see it and perhaps even more, you can see when it's not there! What is Paul seeing? Maybe he visited Thessalonica and saw people more patient with one another, or more generous to one another. Maybe he saw a church that was more willing to give hospitality to the stranger, or more open-hearted to new people coming around, or more willing to include new people in their chat. Maybe before he was aware that some were being critical, even judgemental of others, but that has stopped; or some who were gossiping and talking about others behind their backs and that's not happening anymore! Whatever he sees, their love for one another is increasing and that is to be commended.

*"among God's..."* (2 Thessalonians 1:4) This is marathon-running word. If you watch a marathon, with its twenty-six miles of running, quite often there is someone who goes off into the lead early. Some other runners might go with him, but the experienced marathon runners will not; they will wait and wait. Usually, the people who go off fast, early, by the time the race is half-way through they have given up, stopped, having run out of energy. Marathons are not won in the first five or even ten miles; the prize for winning the marathon comes at the end, to

the person who has kept going for twenty-six miles! This is the picture Paul has for the church in Thessalonica: they are keeping going; they are persevering in their faith. They are doing this against the background of trouble and difficulty, against the background of suffering and hardship and persecution for their faith. Faith is a struggle in Thessalonica; it always was, from the very beginning: when Paul was there first, some people started a riot because they didn't like what he was saying and he had to be secreted away in the middle of the night. These struggles go on and through these struggles, Christians are keeping believing and loving one another and not giving up.

We might find it hard today to say that the Church in Scotland is growing. If we look at the numbers and the statistics then they all speak of the decline of Christianity in Scotland. Some churches are bucking that statistical trend but not enough to change the national picture. We'd have to say that the Church is smaller now and generally older now; we'd have to say that finances are becoming tighter now and that buildings are becoming more of a drain. We'd have to say that leadership is becoming more difficult to find and people like me are becoming fewer. All of that might seem to say that the Church is in decline and that church growth is a foreign language to us.

But let me take you back to my first question: how is church different now from last year? There are people who are here today who were not here at this time last year and maybe were not in any church last year. We have contact with people today through Messy Church that we had not met last year. We have had children at Holiday Club and other events that we had not seen last year. Our young people are meeting today and this time last year there was no settled opportunity for them to talk about faith. We have people taking on responsibilities in church life that they did not have last year.

If we ask the personal question about how we are different, we could say similar things. Some of us know things about Jesus and Christian faith that we didn't know before; I know that because you tell me! Some of us believe things about Jesus that we weren't sure about before but are now convinced are true. Some of us are more confident in what we think and believe and feel more able to talk about our faith with family and friends; this is harder to measure, but again you tell me some of these things. Here is church that is growing in our faith; here is a church where God is at work in us so that faith is growing and increasing. Challenges remain, that we keep growing in faith, that we keep increasing in our love for one another and that we persevere in that faith even against the background of struggles for the church and in our personal lives.

Paul boasts about Thessalonian Church; he sees good things and gives thanks to God. We're not sure about the language of boasting, but it is right to celebrate God's grace in our midst. But Paul is not naïve; he knows that there is more still to do. So he prays: "*We constantly....*" (2 *Thessalonians 1:11f*) The big idea in this prayer is that God will still be at work in His church. There are three ways: that God will count them worthy, not by their own achievements but by His grace, worthy to be His people; that God will be at work in them to help them complete their work, serving God, so that they may do the good things they plan to do; and that Jesus be glorified in the life of His church and that the church will share in Jesus' glory in the fullness of time. God will still be at work in His church; God will not leave the church to its own devices; God will not abandon the church to struggles and persecutions, but God will still be at work in His people to bless, help and strengthen us. There is still work to be done; we are still a work in progress; there are good things done and to celebrate, but there is more to do!

Something of the church in Juniper Green needs to be celebrated; we give thanks to God for all that is good, for the reasons why we would want other people to come to our church! When we boast it is about the grace of God not about ourselves, so we give thanks to God; there are good things, God has been at work. But there are still things to do: faith still needs to grow, love still needs to increase, perseverance is still a quality we need. Augustine was an early

Church leader and he looked at the church and he saw what the church needed; he wrote: "Pray as if everything depends on God; work as if everything depends on you." What a great balance! We're good, some of us, at the working part; maybe we forget the praying part too easily. But that's the balance we need in church today.

We need to keep working, taking opportunities to grow our faith, to learn new things about Jesus, to challenge ourselves about believing new things from the Bible; we need to increase the spirit of love in our hearts and in church life, caring for others, being more patient, more generous, providing hospitality to the stranger; we need to work at perseverance, having the spirit of the marathon runner in our hearts, not willing to give up. Prayer is key, to ask God to help us, to pray that God will still be at work in our church life, praying that He will continue the work He has begun, and that He will help us to put hopes and plans into practice, helping us to do mission in our community. "Pray as if everything depends on God; work as if everything depends on you."

A growing Church? We need eyes to see, underneath the surface, in our hearts. What is God doing in us? What is God doing in His Church? Where are the signs of growth? They are there to see. Pray for more; pray for a growing faith, for an increasing love, for the spirit perseverance in own hearts and minds!