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Part 1: The Sermon

"The Answer Within"
1 Thessalonians 2:9-13
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When I was a kid, the question most on my mind – besides when was GI Joe coming on television? – was, "why do I need to go to school?" The stuff I was learning there didn't seem to have any meaning for me at all. The quadratic equation – why did I need to learn that? Diagramming sentences – what was the point? I liked history – but what difference did it make for me to know when Columbus discovered America, especially when it was clear to me that he wasn't the first person to step foot on the continent – the Indians were here first! My Dad, who was working on his PhD in education, got an earful from me, and was patient to explain I would one day figure it all out. Some of those things I understood and some of those things I never did quite figure out.

The irony of my education was that I use the classes that were electives far more these days than my primary courses. Typing is something that I use every single day. I use bowling far more than linear algebra. I use construction far more than I use chemistry. Why did I learn all that stuff? What was the point? School, why did I bother?

My fear is that we come to a similar point in our faith as well. What is the point of all of this? Why do we come to church? Why do we study the Bible? Why do we sing the hymns? Why do we come here week after week after week? My fear isn't that we ask the questions – my fear is that we don't ever try to answer them. Because, if we don't, I know all too well how boring this can be. The hymns of the faith are as C.S Lewis once called them, "fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music".[1] The sermons at best are slightly entertaining but at worse are dreadfully boring. Prayers go on and on without end, until we finally succumb to the darkness and pass out, only to be awoken by a kindly nudge of a neighbor or the blast of the organ. We

[1] In P. Yancey, **Finding God in Unexpected Places**, Zondervan: Ann Arbor, MI (1997), pg. 226.

come here out of compulsion or out of habit or out of fear – IF, and if only, we never answer those questions that nag at our hearts. Why do we come to church? "Church, why bother?"[2]

Yet, we see people all around us that have different hearts. They come to every Bible study, hungering for the smallest nugget that might feed their soul. They sing even the most inconsequential hymns with passion, eyes closed, with their hands raised as if they are offering their words up to heaven – even out of key or out of rhythm as they are. They come eager to worship God every single week, discussing those sermons we walked away from saying, "How boring!" as if they were the Wisdom of Solomon. And we just don't understand those people. We roll our eyes. We never wonder why they are the way they are – and instead continuing living our lives in an orderly dispassionate way.

Yet, I have a haunting feeling that some of you are struggling with those very questions that I just raised. You don't walk out of this place we call a sanctuary feeling very safe, feeling very fulfilled. You don't walk away wondering, "Why didn't I get more from that?" You walk away wanting something more. You want to grow. You are wondering, "Why did I even bother?"

This is the heart of the words of Paul's message to Thessalonica. They were a young church that Paul saw a spark in. What was that spark that made them different in his eyes? Hear from verse 13, "And we thank God continually because when you received the Word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, *which is at work in you (you!) who believe*. (NIV)"

"The word of God in you who believe." The very power of God within all of us who have faith, that is what Paul saw in the church in Macedonia. There was nothing special about these folks. Paul doesn't say that they were particularly bright or very educated. Instead, he speaks of their works produced by faith, their labor produced by love, and their endurance inspired by

[2] This phrase comes from a Phillip Yancey book of the same title, **Church, Why Bother?**

hope.[3] That which changed them was not external, but rather something within. They found that which they longed for all their lives, and discovered that God had been searching for them as well.

What Paul brought to them was the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And what they did was they believed in it – not as just a new philosophy but as the very Word of God. Not as an inspiring story, but as the life changing power of the Holy Spirit. After this, the disciples merely encouraged that which God had given to them. And they, the people of Thessalonica in this church, were never ever the same.

God's Word was at work within them. Like a pacemaker, their hearts were now quickened not by the things of the world but by their desire for the divine. As Jesus had said in the desert, years before, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."[4] Those are the words Paul is hinting at as he speaks of this church – they are growing because of their desire to grow in God's Word.

So, what does this say to our predicament? How in the world does this answer our question about why do we come to this place? I think it is at the root of the problem. We come seeking something inside these walls, or written on these pages, or spoken from this pulpit, or sung in the words of the hymns, or hidden in the smiles of the children… but the secret that we desire most is within us as I speak. God has written his very Word on our hearts. And His Word is His undying love for us, His passion for us, and His hope that we might learn His ways, and give up our own and that we might seek to grow in His love.

God calls us to do more than just go to church. He calls us to have His Word within us. This means more than merely knowing Scripture. This means having a passionate feeling for

[3] 1 Thessalonians 1:3.
[4] Matthew 4:4.

Scripture, having a desire to know more, a desire to know our Lord. It is far more than an image, or a movie, or someone that we think about at Christmas time. To know our Lord on a daily basis, to come seeking His face, to come seeking the Knowledge of God, asking God to write His Word upon our hearts, that we would know that this is just as a book but as His Word. That it might be more than something we study, but that something we desire so earnestly that we want to know it intimately, that we might know every detail. That we might desire more than anything else is to know what God would have willed for us. That we might know His word, that it might work within us, that we might live His Word, that we might truly be His people.

You see, what leads us to these questions is that we come to this place like men and women, and not the image of God. We treat this place like we might treat a college class, or Thursday night television, or a new CD from Wal-Mart. We accept the Word of God, well, like the word of men. And so worship might be entertaining or it might be boring. A song might be good or it might be bad. I might get something out of worship or, then again, I might not get anything out of worship.

But we are called to come to this place so very differently. Everything about this place is different: stained glass, an organ, pews, robes, ornate ceilings. Even our words here are different: we call it the Narthex instead of the foyer, the pulpit instead of a lectern, the choir instead of singers. We do this to say, "Don't come in here thinking as you might have come in the world. Come in here seeking after something you don't find that often out there. Come seeking the Word of God."

And from the moment you enter, the goal is to worship God. And from the outset, we are seeking the Holy Spirit might speak to us, that the Word of God might act within us. In order for that (to happen), we have to be open to God to do something incredible – not something

ordinary. We have to believe in the mystery of God – we must have faith that this is truly the very Word of God spoken every moment in this place - that God is speaking to us even now through our hearts. This is not the construct of man. This is the Word of God. And when we do that something radically changes. The Word of God is at work within us.

The quote I spoke from C.S. Lewis described how he saw things when first walked into church. But hear the conclusion he came to: "I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit."[5] It wasn't the wonder of the words or the depth of the notes of the music but the passion of those around singing the words and singing the notes that made Lewis stop and realize something was at work within him that was far greater than the most beautiful poetry might stir up within him, or the greatest composer could write. He realized that the word of God was working within him. He discovered a passion that he would never know in the world.

It is when this happens that our questions begin to fall away, and are replaced by the answers that lie in faith. Sermons presented by a young associate pastor somehow have some nugget of truth in them. Anticipation replaces boredom. Desire to learn comes more from within and not merely out of our human inquisitiveness. We stop looking at this place as we might from our old selves, and we realize this is a place of God. We come here to worship, to study, and to grow. Not everything we might learn here applies to our daily lives, but everything helps us grow closer to God. The Word of God within us draws us closer to Him. This is a place where we hear the Word that is working within us.

[5] In P. Yancey, **Finding God in Unexpected Places**, Zondervan: Ann Arbor, MI (1997), pg. 226.

The night before I graduated from high school, I got together with a group of friends not to party but to reminisce. My best friend had gone through every class with me from 1st grade on. And as we looked back and saw all the students that … well, weren't going to graduate with us. And we wondered what ever happened William, what ever happened to Charlie, what happened to those kids that just disappeared. We knew they never moved – they just dropped out. And looking back, we couldn't figure out why they dropped out. Maybe they couldn't figure out why school was so important – why it was important to learn the things that they might not ever use. It was boring for them, I imagine. So they decided, what was the point? Maybe they asked themselves a question, and never bothered to find an answer. Maybe they never found anything within themselves to keep going. Maybe that's why they fell away.