

## “RUNNING ON EMPTY”

December 1, 2024 I Thessalonians 3:9-13

Over 20 years ago I took up **running**. Of course, what do all good professionals do, you buy a book on the art of running. Actually, the book was very helpful on how to train, shoes to buy, schedule and so forth. At the time, we lived in a small town which provided several routes to run on, including around the high school and a river trail. I enjoyed running. It cleared my head, built my endurance, and got rid of stress.

I remember entering my very first race. It was the Anchor Hocking Glass Run, a challenging 5K with lots of hills. I trained, I felt like I was ready for the challenge, and was excited to be on the line. However, I wish I had read the running book a little closer, especially the chapter on keeping a steady pace. When the starter gun sounded, I shot off the line like it was a 100-yard dash. Big Mistake! At about the 1-mile mark I thought I was going to die. How I ever finished that race was a mystery to me. All I know is it took me half an hour to catch me breath and begin to feel normal again. I crossed the finish line, but I definitely was running on empty. Fortunately, I learned from my mistake and when I entered a 10K race I did well.

I wonder how many of us have ever felt like we were **running on empty**. Maybe we have been working 80-hour weeks. Maybe we are taking care of our normal work and family life and now need to take care of mom too. Maybe we are wrestling with health issues, fighting with medical insurance, and not getting the results we want. Maybe our

schedules are so packed we don't have room for one more item, yet we agreed to head up the church finance committee. Maybe we have a child who is autistic and struggling in school.

The list of possibilities could be endless and at times it can feel like life is outpacing us. We become emotionally, physically, and even spiritually exhausted. We are running on empty just in time for the Christmas holidays. O Yeah!

I imagine that the Apostle Paul frequently felt overwhelmed. While in Galatia, what is modern day Turkey, he envisioned a call to Macedonia, what is **modern day Greece**. Paul and friends take a ship to Philippi, and walk to Amphipolis, Thessalonica, Beroea, Athens, Corinth, and Cenchrea. The man got his steps in. All the while, Paul is preaching the gospel in the synagogues or public squares, with varying reactions. Some of these reactions got him thrown in jail, beaten up, or chased out of town. Yet, the Holy Spirit was moving, and in many of these towns there were people who responded to the good news and formed small house churches.

One of those churches was in the town of Thessalonica. Paul spent only 3 weeks in town before having to leave in the cover of night. Paul was under constant scrutiny and hardship, but he was stressed out over this young church. He didn't want to leave them behind. He was concerned how they were holding up under public pressure. He longed to know how they were doing spiritually, but of course there was no phone or internet connection. This is to say nothing about the fact that Paul and

his companions were traveling on foot, roughly 20 miles per day, trying to earn their sustenance, protect their belongings and avoid the calamitous perils of travel that plagued even the best Roman roads.

When I think about all Paul went through, I sit back and marvel at his endurance. He was human, just like you and me. Much of the time he must have been running on empty. How did he deal with all the stress of his life and not go totally bonkers?

## **I. TRAVELED WITH OTHERS**

**Reverend Stan Ott** – was pastor of a growing church in downtown Pittsburgh. He developed a program called, “**Growing a Vital Church**”, which I enrolled in. Rev. Ott is strategically minded, big on process. I don’t recall everything from the training, but I do remember his **With Me Principle**. Stan believed in giving permission to people’s passion and ideas. So if someone came up with an idea, rather than tell them outright yes or no, he gave them a set of principles to follow. If they couldn’t follow or build those principles into their ministry, then the church wouldn’t approve it.

The **With Me principle** was we do ministry together. Rev. Ott would say okay, you have this ministry idea. If you want to go forward, then you need to get at least one other person with the same passion and commitment to it. There are no one man or one woman shows here. We do ministry together or we don’t do it.

**“Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.”**

The Apostle Paul practiced the With Me Principle. As intellectually and spiritually gifted as he was, Paul did ministry with others. Thessalonica is a great example. He did not go there alone; he had Silas and Timothy with him. When Paul could not get personally back to Thessalonica, he sends Timothy to check up on them along with this letter and then report back. In other words, he didn't try to handle everything on his own.

I wonder what would happen if we tried living by the **WITH ME PRINCIPLE** in our work, our church, and our lives. To have the combined resources, wisdom, and encouragement of a group is a powerful experience. It won't eliminate all the stress that drains us, but it could sure lighten the load and sustain us in difficult times. It might just help us to reprioritize and let some things go. It might help us realize everything is not resting on our shoulders alone. It might help us deal with our pride and learn to ask for help. Even Batman had Robin. And it might just help us live as the Body of Christ. If we are running on empty it might be that we are running alone. Sustaining power comes from supportive groups.

## **II. TRAVELED WITH GOD**

Once I had a serviceman come out to fix our **washing machine**. We got to talking and he said to me that when people call in a say their washing machine isn't working, the first question he always asks is, “**Is**

**the machine plugged in and is the power on?”** The serviceman said, **“You cannot believe the number of homes I have gone to repair that were simply unplugged or the breaker was tripped. Unfortunately, I am required to charge them the \$75 service call.”**

The second key to Paul’s endurance is that he was plugged in to God. Paul walked with God and God was the source of his strength. In the five verses we read this morning, either God or Jesus is mentioned 7 times. This section is a prayer, and it becomes obvious that God was the focus of Paul’s life and ministry. He was God dependent and did nothing without God’s guidance. This prayer gives us some insight into what Paul’s life with God was like.

#### **A. THANKS AND CELEBRATION**

Paul prays, **“How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?”**

In spite of all the difficulties, suffering, challenges, and disappointments Paul was a man of praise. Throughout his letters he consistently gives thanks to God for all that God has done both in his lives and the lives of his churches. Even when he is beaten and thrown in prison, Paul is praising God. It’s not that he doesn’t recognize his circumstances, but that he trusts in the God who is bigger than his circumstances. Paul believed that God could use even his suffering to build the church. So he gives thanks.

How often do we give thanks and praise to God? Let's put it another way. You see, when we forget to be grateful then we get resentful. When we want what we don't possess we miss what we do have. When we are holding on so tight to life, we become fearful, selfish, and turn inward. Lack of gratitude drains us of life. The simple act of thanks gives us power to transcend.

**Frederick Buechner**, in *The Sacred Journey* wrote, "To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters, even to ourselves, because it is only by journeying for the world's sake — even when the world bores and sickens and scares you half to death — that little by little we start to come alive. It was not a conclusion that I came to in time. It was a conclusion from beyond time that came to me. God knows I have never been any good at following the road it pointed me to, but at least, by grace, I glimpsed the road and saw that it is the only one worth traveling."

## **B. LOVE AND HOLINESS**

Paul doesn't stop with thanks. He continues to pray, and he asks God to bless the new church with love and holiness. "**And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father as the coming of Christ Jesus with all his saints.**"

I imagine many of us have prayed for romantic love, but that is not what is on Paul's mind. His prayer is for the Thessalonians' love to increase, to abound, and to spread out.

Once there was a wife who complained to her husband, **“Why don't you ever tell me you love me?”** Her husband replied, **“I told you 40 years ago that I loved you and if I ever change my mind, I'll let you know.”** This static kind of love is not the stuff Paul is talking about. He is praying for a dynamic, growing, inclusive love that characterizes our lives, our community of faith, and the way we do ministry. He wants our lives to run on Godly love.

Secondly, Paul prays that the new Christians would be strengthened **in holiness.** That probably sounds strange to us. I mean, how many of us have ever prayed for holiness? Doesn't holiness have something to do with purity, righteousness, and the very nature of God? Indeed it does! Embracing holiness is not so much about absolute perfection, but allowing the Holy Spirit to shape our thoughts, desires, and behaviors, aligning them with God's perfect will. Living in holiness means forsaking the ordinary, the common, and the profane. It means seeking a life that reflects the extraordinary, set-apart nature of God Himself.

But here is the important point. Both Love and Holiness are not something we can achieve on our own. Paul sees them as divine gifts, meaning God is the source of that love and holiness. They are God's

operating powers at work in us. And it is that power that sustains us, motivates us, uplifts us, and drives us when we seem to have nothing left.

The only way we receive them is by being plugged in to God. Love and holiness are God's nature rubbing off on us as we fellowship, follow, and travel this life with God.

My children frequently send us pictures of our grandchildren's achievements. They take pictures of report cards, artwork, first steps, and soccer scores. They want to share the moment with us and to celebrate and boast what their children have accomplished.

Our scripture passage ends with these words, **"...that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."** Just like a proud parent, Paul wants to present the Thessalonian Church people before Jesus Christ and hear those words of "well done!" He is looking forward to the second coming, the Advent, the arrival of Christ, to celebrate the one he has run his race for. On this first Sunday of Advent let us remember to travel with others and with God. We don't have to run on empty, especially when we are filled with the love and holiness of God. Amen.



## **I Thessalonians 3:9-13**

<sup>9</sup>How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?

<sup>10</sup>Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever 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 make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

<sup>13</sup>And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.