

- ***READ I Thessalonians 4:1,2*** If there was to be a single person who could be pointed out as having most closely followed the words of our Lord Jesus in **Matthew 28:18-20** concerning the going into all the world and sharing the Gospel, that person would almost certainly have to be pointed out as the Apostle Paul. **Chapters 13-21 of the book of Acts** provides us with great detail concerning what is known as the three preaching or missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul and his travel companions. Throughout these journeys, Paul visited no less than ten different regions and 25 specific cities while establishing groups of disciples all along the way.
- Some of Paul's stops were prolonged such as his stay in Corinth which lasted about 18 months. (**Acts 18:11**) Then there were other stops such as the time he spent in Thessalonica which lasted only three weeks. (**Acts 17:2**) Yet, regardless of the time spent in these different locations, Paul left a part of himself with each group of disciples that he established in Christ. I can't think of Paul and his work of establishing churches without thinking of **II Corinthians 11:28** where Paul has just finished detailing to the Corinthians the sufferings he has experienced in Christ. Many of those sufferings he endured in his efforts to establish disciples, but it was the disciples themselves that remained foremost on Paul's mind. *"Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches."* Yes, Paul suffered many things that could weigh heavy on his heart, but the greatest weight upon him was the concern that he had for the disciples that he had helped come to faith in Jesus Christ.
- This part of Paul's character is made evident in this text, but we can look beyond his stating concern and just look at Paul's and other men's efforts in writing the New Testament letters and come to realize very quickly that Paul and others truly cared for these people. He wasn't satisfied with them simply being established in their faith and experiencing some growth. No, he wanted so much more for these brethren. That desire is aptly stated in what Paul wrote to the Thessalonians that we read a few moments ago. Paul wanted them to not just grow and then fall off...no he wanted for all these brethren to be a people who were continuing to excel still more.
- This church spent much of 2018 focusing on being firmly established and growing in our faiths in Jesus Christ. We worked our way through the Gospels and the Book of Acts tracing the works and efforts Jesus and the Apostles so that we might have a faith that was firmly rooted in the truth of the Gospel and Jesus's expectations of His people. It is my hope that each of us can honestly look in the mirror at ourselves and around us within this local church and see the fruits of those efforts to grow and be firmly established. And yet...we cannot become overly satisfied with what might have been accomplished last year. Instead, we ought to recognize that Paul's desire for the Thessalonians is the same desire that he and King Jesus have for us: That we, too, continue to excel in our faiths.
- With this thought in mind, the leadership of this church has decided to make take the natural next step in our yearly focus by giving attention in 2019 to the thought of Excelling Still More in all that we do. If it was necessary for these brethren, who had grown, to be reminded to continue to excel in what they did, then we would do well to recognize our need to do the exact same thing. Before we get into some of the specifics of our plan for this year, I'd like to take a closer look for a few minutes on Paul's words to the Thessalonians in **I Thessalonians 3** so that we might come to more firmly understand the Apostles strong desire for God's people to continue to excel in all that they do.

I. Paul's Admonition To The Thessalonians

A. Paul & Silas established this group of disciples during the 2nd preaching journey of Paul.

1. As has already been mentioned, one of the aspects of Paul's ministry in the Gospel that is most well known are the three preaching or missionary trips that Paul carried out. These preaching trips should be familiar to us with having just read through them in our Daily Bible reading we just concluded in 2018. The three trips are as follows:

- The first of Paul's trips is recorded beginning in **Acts 13:1** and spans to what is recored in **Acts 14:28** when Paul and his companions return to Antioch the city and church which seems to have served as Paul's home base. This trip, which is believed to have taken place in the years 46 and 47, included travels mainly through the areas of Syria, Cyprus, Lycia, and Galatia.
 - The second trip can be found in beginning in **Acts 15:36** and concluding all the way in **Acts 18:22**. This trip, which is believed to have taken place from the year 49-51, spanned a much larger area as Paul once again began in Antioch, went through Galatia, but then entered new territories such as Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia before returning through Palestine and then back up to Antioch.
 - Paul's final preaching trip, which picks up pretty quickly in the text in **Acts 18:23** and going through **Acts 21:17**, but which might have actually been after a little break putting it beginning in the year 52, follows a very similar route as his second trip. Paul, once again, starts out from Antioch, goes through Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia, but then we find Paul spending much more time among the cities of Asia before going on to Rhodes, Lycia, Syria, and eventually retuning to Jerusalem in Palestine.
2. It was during the second trip that we find Paul going through Thessalonica and establishing disciples in this city. In **Acts 17:1-10**, we read that Paul and Silas arrive in this Macedonian city, and they immediately went to the synagogue of the Jews where they *"for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures."* (**Acts 17:2**) Luke records for us that Paul's efforts centered around giving evidence that Jesus was killed, but was also raised so that He might be proclaimed as Christ to all people, even these people...the Thessalonians. Thankfully, Paul's hard work in this short time resulted in some being persuaded and joining Paul and Silas in their devotion to the Lord. Even *"a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women"* (**Acts 17:4**) were persuaded to devote themselves to Christ. This was the beginning of Paul's relationship with these brothers and sisters.
- B. Paul was thankful for their commitment to Jesus even in the face of opposition.**
1. The letter that we have written by Paul to these brethren in Thessalonica isn't believed to have been a long time coming. In fact, many believe that this letter was written very quickly following their time spent in Thessalonica maybe even with a year of their departure. One of the reasons for the quick writing of this letter very well could center around the circumstances surrounding Paul and Silas's quick departure from Thessalonica.
 2. Luke records in **Acts 17:5-10** that some of the Jews were becoming jealous of Paul's efforts and success in the Gospel so they sought, along with other wicked men, to put a stop to his efforts by causing an uproar within the city. They even went to the house of a disciple named Jason and dragged him and some other disciples out in front of the people accusing them of helping Paul and upsetting the world. After Jason and the others had given them a pledge, which more than likely would've been like posting bail money, they were released, and *"the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas say by night to Berea."* (**Acts 17:10**)
 3. It was this experience in Thessalonica that is the backdrop for the letter that Paul writes to these brethren, and we see Paul mentioning the persecution he and Silas faced during their time there. *"For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the Gospel of God amid much opposition."* (**I Thessalonians 2:1,2**) The difficulties faced by Paul in this place as he established disciples only caused for him to have a deeper love for these brethren. Surely they would've been counted with those that were constantly on his mind. *"Therefore, when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the Gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith."* (**I Thessalonians 3:1,2**)

4. It was Paul's desire to send Timothy to these brethren not so that he might produce faith within them, but he was sent so that he might encourage them to remain strong and faithful. These brethren had a strong faith in Jesus, and in **I Thessalonians 1:6-10**, Paul goes on to explain just how strong and well known of a faith that these brethren possessed. *"For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything."* (**I Thessalonians 1:8**) This was a strong church filled with strong disciples!
- C. Yet, Paul strongly encouraged these brethren to excel and not slack in their service to God.
1. Yes, these brethren had a strong faith, but that didn't stop the Apostle Paul from writing to these brethren so that they might be encouraged to strive for even greater faith and service to God. This very much seems to be the focus behind what Paul writes in **I Thessalonians 3**.
 - a) *"we sent Timothy...to **strengthen and encourage you as to your faith.**"* (v.2)
 - b) *"...we were comforted about you through your faith; for now we really live, if you **stand firm in the Lord.**"* (vv.7,8)
 - c) *"May the Lord cause you to **increase and abound in love for one another**"* (v.12)
 - d) *"that He may **establish your hearts without blame in holiness**"* (v.13)
 - e) *"that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to **walk and please God**"* (4:1)
 - f) *"that you **excel still more.**"* (4:1)
 2. Was Paul thrilled to hear about the great faith of these brethren? Of course he was! The entire opening of the letter contains strong language of commendation for these disciples, and yet what we see following the wonderful opening are words of further encouragement. Yes, Paul was very happy that his efforts in Thessalonica had not been done in vain, but he also recognized that these disciples still had a great deal of work to do in their faiths. He was not going to allow them to become satisfied or complacent in their faiths! These brethren had done well during the early stages of their walk with Christ, but now Paul wants for them to take the next step in their faiths by having a total focus that is set on excellence. This focus that Paul desired for these brethren is the same focus that we want to have in 2019.

II. Our Plan To Excel In 2019

A. Build upon 2018 efforts.

1. It can be really easy for anyone who has put a lot of effort into achieving a goal, to finally achieve said goal, and then sit back and relax for the foreseeable future. This is true even when it comes to our spiritual endeavors. For a whole year we focused primarily on coming to know Jesus and His expectations for us. We focused on discipleship and what it means to be a true follower of Jesus. We focused on how that aspect of who we are affects us in every area of our lives. Let's be honest with ourselves for just a moment...we put in some real work last year in many ways!
2. And yet, we are not going to take a break in 2019 or let up in any sort of way. In fact, we are going to continue to build upon the efforts of 2018 by striving to excel even more in those areas in which we grew last year. In order to do that, each of us have to take some time to evaluate ourselves so that we can know where we have been and where we are going this year. We have to take time to look at ourselves and see where we are in our faiths. This was something that Paul insisted the Corinthians do in **II Corinthians 13:5** when he instructs them, *"Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you — unless indeed you fail the test?"*
3. Therefore, if we want to truly build upon the efforts that we put forth in 2018 then we need to pause and ask some important questions. The first question might be simply, *"In what ways did I grow in 2018?"* This is a good question because it allows us to see the where we found success, but it also helps us to see in which areas we can take a big strong next step. The next

question might be, *"In what areas do I need to see the most growth this year?"* Where in our lives do we see ourselves lacking? This type of consideration might not be all that enjoyable, but if we are being honest with ourselves then we will have to admit that this type of evaluation is extremely helpful. Without a target goal to shoot at, we will probably pause at some point throughout the year and wonder... *"Where am I going? What am I trying to achieve?"*

4. Maybe you have someone you know in your life that might fit this description. It is a person who doesn't really seem to have any goals in life. He or she just goes about from day to day doing this or that, but never really taking a true meaningful step in life. You ask them what they want to do in life and they don't have a real answer. The sad truth is that this type of person will more than likely stop one day and wonder what they have to show for the life they have lived. Unfortunately, they might find themselves in a place where they feel as if they have simply wasted away the days that have been given to them.
5. These same things can be true of us in a spiritual sense. Unless we identify solid goals and focuses, we run the risk of feeling as if we have simply wasted valuable time that has been given to us by God. This is why we put together a yearly focus and plan. We want to know what our goals are and how we can achieve them. The goal for this year is to continue to build upon the solid foundation laid in 2018.

B. Strong focus on N.T. Letters.

1. One of the ways we can do that is by following the progression of the New Testament by putting a strong focus and emphasis in the the N.T. Letters. I don't want to say too much on this focus this morning because I want to talk much more about this tonight, but for now I will simply point out that our Daily Bible Reading and many of our Bible Classes will center around studies and considerations of the New Testament Letters.
2. The hope is that the Daily reading and considerations of last year will have provided a strong foundation on which can be building the additional teachings that can be found within the NT Letters. The disciples that the letters are addressed to can often find their beginnings back during the time of the events of the book of Acts, and our 2019 considerations will look at how successful or maybe even unsuccessful they had been since that time. There is no shortage of growth that can be had by each of us this year as we focus on this section of Scripture.

C. Continued opportunities for growth and service.

1. Finally, we want to continue to offer many opportunities for growth and service that were available in years past while also adding additional opportunities.
 - a) As we have already experienced this year, the first Wednesday night of each new quarter will be our regularly scheduled song service. This allows all of our classes to be able to start on a Sunday, but it more importantly opens up the 5th Sunday night service for the young men of our congregation to have opportunity to grow in their abilities to lead worship. March, June, September, and December all have 5th Sundays, and our young men are encouraged to take part in leading that worship assembly.
 - b) The 2nd term beginning in mid-February will combine our middle and high school classes together while separating them by gender so that each class can focus on specific studies that are important and relevant to them. The young men's class will focus during those 6 weeks on skills that will help them to serve in those roles of leading worship so they will be adequately prepared for that first youth led service on March 31st.
 - c) Let's be sure to encourage those young men as they prepare themselves to serve in those roles, and let's be sure to have our calendars marked so that we can be here to support them on those Sunday nights.

2. Additionally, we have added two new events for this upcoming calendar year. On top of our traditional meeting and VBS efforts in March and June, we will now also be taking on the efforts of a young people's weekend in July and an annual song service at the end of October.
 - a) Terry Francis will be the featured speaker for our first annual young people's weekend this year which will take place the 3rd weekend of July...Friday night the 19th through Sunday the 21st.
 - b) Dan Lankford will be the featured leader for our singing which is scheduled for October 26.
 - c) We will be hard at work over the next few months organizing these events and I hope that everyone will look at your calendars and do everything possible to work around these events so we can support them to the highest degree. We, the leadership of this church, believe that Pleasant Plains should be a shining beacon in this area of Tennessee. We have tremendous ability, and we want to use our abilities to serve not only this church in these ways but disciples from the surrounding area as best as we can. We obviously want for our members to support these efforts, but we also want to invite as many people as possible to join us in these efforts.
3. And then from an eternal standpoint, we are continuing to provide as many opportunities as possible for our church family members to serve and grow as possible.
 - a) We have switched all of our classes to an 8 term schedule that will allow for more people to be able to teach and more topics and studies to be considered. If you are scheduled to teach and your topic of study has not yet been decided, please get with Marty Gailey as soon as possible so those details can be ironed out.
 - b) Our traditional in house men's, ladies', young people's, and adult studies will continue each month with that information being found in our booklets, on the bulletin board, and also on the pre-service slides.
 - c) I'd also like to point out that there are some additional study efforts being put forth by some of our individual members throughout each week. If you are interested in being a part of any of those efforts then see any of your shepherds, myself, or Austin Lewis.
 - d) And then lastly, our service groups will continue for this year, please reference the booklet to see which group you are in, who your group leader is, and which months you are going to be responsible for.

As we can all see, there is a lot of good work that is scheduled to be done here within the Pleasant Plains Church of Christ in 2019! The plans have been laid, but the potential success of this congregation will only be realized if each of us are willing to put forth the effort to achieve that success. A solid foundation was laid in the year 2018, and in 2019 our goal is to continue to build and have it said that we are excelling in all that we do. This goal was Paul's desire for the churches during his day especially the church in Thessalonica, and if he were alive today I would be very confident in saying that he'd have the same desire for this church. He'd want nothing more than for us to continue to grow and thrive in our faith and service the Lord in this place. May God be with us and strengthen us as we strive to make it our goal and focus to excel still more in 2019.