

Ministry of Grace Church

1 Thessalonians Chapter 3

Preface:

Several weeks ago we started our study of the book of 1 Thessalonians. This letter was written to real people who were experiencing real problems in a world that was not friendly to their Christian faith. You and I can easily identify with these people because we live in a similar world and face many of the same problems. We may not be suffering outright persecution for our faith, but we certainly are not respected for it either.

In the previous chapter, Paul expressed how hard he worked for the church in Thessalonica, and how hard they worked at maintaining a reputation of Christ-likeness. Like a father, Paul encouraged and charged the new believers there to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. He also expressed how he longed to see them again. Now he continues on that thought.

Paul's Sacrificial Love for the Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

¹Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ²and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

Notes:

One of the elementary rules of Bible study is: "Whenever you see a 'wherefore' or a 'therefore' you need to determine what it is *there for*." The word "therefore" is translated from the Greek word *dio*, which basically means, "because of this." So, the question is "what is the 'this' that it is referring to?" The answer lies in the last 4 verses of the previous chapter. Paul feels like he was "torn away" from Thessalonica when he initially ministered to the church there. Over and over again, he wanted to get back to see them, but he was not able to. The reason that he wanted to see them again was two-fold. First of all, he wanted to finish laying the groundwork of Christian faith for them so that they would not be deceived and drawn away from the truth. The second reason he wanted to see them again was for the joy of fellowshiping with them because they had become so dear to him.

Obviously, it was painful for Paul to be separated from the Thessalonian Christians. But it was also painful for him to be separated from Timothy, who he referred to as "my true child in the faith" in 1 Timothy. In fact, Timothy had become even more than a son to Paul. He was Paul's partner in the ministry, so being separated from him would be difficult for Paul. But he was more

concerned with the spiritual welfare of the Thessalonian Christians than he was about his own comfort. So, he sent Timothy back to “establish and exhort” them. This is a true sign that not only was Paul an eminent evangelist, he also had a pastor’s heart for these people. And - Paul wanted the Thessalonian Christians to be comforted and not to worry about all the stories they might have heard of the persecution that Paul and his team were suffering. Paul knew that persecution and affliction were part of the expectation for an itinerant evangelist, but he wanted the Thessalonian Christians to know the truth and to hear it from a reliable source.

Also, being separated from his loved ones meant that he wasn’t able to get updates about how they were doing. Remember, this was before the era of cell phones or land-lines, before texting, before e-mail, even before snail mail. And – you couldn’t just hop in your car and drive the 300 miles and stay at a Holiday Inn while you’re there. When any of us are separated from loved ones without any news of what’s happening, we usually fear the worst. Not only did the Thessalonians not know what was going on with Paul and the missionary team, the team didn’t know what was happening in Thessalonica either. Paul’s worst fear for the Thessalonians was that our adversary, the tempter, had somehow gotten to them and led them astray.

Timothy's Encouraging Report

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

⁶But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? ¹¹Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹²and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Notes:

Obviously, this letter was sent to the Thessalonians after Timothy had returned. When he returned to Paul at Corinth, he brought **good news**. The Thessalonians were doing well in faith and love, and they had fond memories of Paul. The verb translated “brought good news” is the same verb that is translated, “preach the gospel” elsewhere in the Bible. In fact, this is the only place in the New Testament where it is translated otherwise.

Paul wrote this letter from Corinth, and his arrival there was marked by difficulty. He said of his coming to Corinth, “**I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling**” (1 **Corinthians 2:3**). Yet since Timothy came back with good news, Paul felt refreshed and renewed. It made Paul feel much better that the Thessalonians were doing well. He even expressed it as having, “**all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God**” Once again, this is a demonstration of his “pastor’s heart.” Paul even prayed that he might be with the Thessalonians again. Even in this letter, Paul prays:

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you,
(1 Thessalonians 3:11)

Finally, as he does in each section of this letter, Paul makes a reference to the coming of the Lord. However, this is not what most people read it to be. This is NOT a reference to Jesus' coming to earth to rapture the saints off the earth. Yet, it is a reference to part of the rapture process. As we have discussed before, at the rapture, we will all be given our heavenly bodies, taken up to be with Jesus, and then we will appear before the Bema Seat to receive rewards for the works that have been done while in this mortal body. Then Jesus will present us to His Father as his glorious, blameless, and holy bride. Notice it says:

so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1 Thessalonians 3:13)

The expression, "the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" is a reference to Jesus "coming" to the Father with all His saints. When Jesus comes at the rapture, he will not be coming "with all His saints," because the saints (at least their perishable bodies) will be on the earth when He comes.

So What?

One of the things that makes this letter so unique is that in it we see the humanity of Paul. Given that he was personally responsible for starting more new churches than anyone else, and given that he has written more of the New Testament than anyone else, it becomes easy for us to see him as a paragon of Christian virtue and of Christian life.

In fact, he may very well be the paragon of Christianity. The problem is that we often think of the positive and glorious side of his exemplary life. We know that God granted him some special privileges that most of us could only dream about, like being able to perform miracles. We think of his life as glorious and without problems. We see him as a godly saint who never had any problems and never suffered like we do. But, that's not the Apostle Paul who is portrayed in the New Testament. When he bragged about anything, it was not about his great success in evangelism, it was about his suffering for Christ. In his second letter to the Christians in Corinth, he said:

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:22-28)

Did you notice that? Paul even had bouts of anxiety! And, he's the one who wrote:

do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:6)

The word translated “anxiety” in **2 Corinthians 11:28** is from the same root as the word “anxious” in **Philippians 4:6**. So, you see that even Paul could not always control how he felt about some things.

“Yes,” you may respond, “Paul had sufferings for Christ, and he may have worried at times, but he had a close walk with God and didn’t constantly trip and fall like I do.” If you believe that, then you probably haven’t read Romans very carefully.

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?
(**Romans 7:15-19, 24**)

Paul was a very special servant of Christ, but he was human like you and I. We have talked a lot since we started this church about where our focus needs to be. Paul had frailties, but he did not focus on those frailties, he focused on his Lord and the job that he was given to do. He focused on others and rejoiced when others received God’s blessings.

We have also talked a lot about the two great commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And – Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” These were the keys to Paul’s life. He was so focused on God and on the good of others that toward the end of his life he could say:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (**2 Timothy 4:6-8**)

It is my opinion that the real key to Paul’s life was humility. The great Apostle Paul never bragged about himself or about his accomplishments. In spite of his greatness in God’s service, he practiced what he preached to the church in Philippi:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (**Philippians 2:3**)

In the first century, humility was not considered a virtue. The secular idea of manhood was self-assertiveness and imposing one’s will on others. If anyone intentionally humbled himself to others it was considered weak and disgraceful. In fact, the idea of humility could not be understood by the secular mind of Paul’s day because they had no spiritual awareness. As much as things have changed over the centuries, some things are still the same.

Throughout the letter to the church in Thessalonica, we see a portrayal of a humble servant of Christ who was deeply concerned about the welfare of others and he was willing to suffer to see others thrive.

Now What?

Few things are sadder to me than a Christian who thinks that he or she is worthless, or a failure. Remember that God chose you before he created anything. He had a reason for choosing you. Also, we should never compare ourselves to other Christians. That is nothing more than an exercise in futility because it produces either false humility or the ugliness of arrogance. Or – worse yet, the pitifulness of a “woe is me, I am so worthless” attitude. When we each recognize that we have not earned, and do not deserve this salvation and the promise of eternal existence with God, then we can begin to be useful to God. All Christians are sinners saved by the grace of God, and He has designed us to serve Him doing good works for Him. Here’s how Paul expressed it to the Christians in Ephesus:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

God has prepared works for each one of us to do. Are you doing what God created you to do? Let’s not waste our time focusing on what we don’t have. Let’s focus on what He has already done for us and what He wants to do in us and through us. Remember, when we are weak, He is strong! We all have work to do, so let’s get to work

Let’s pray.

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