



JANUARY 16, 2022 | PASTOR TIMOTHY SONG

“Strengthening and Encouraging the Church” (1 Thessalonians 3:1-13)

So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God’s service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. 5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.

6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. 7 Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. 8 For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon church. Glad that you can join us online today. Please open your bibles to 1 Thessalonians 3, we will be continuing this series. It’s been a while since we were in this letter so a quick recap. Paul is writing to a Christian community he helped start and has a vested interest in how they are doing since him and his companions, Silas and Timothy, had to flee that city after a short time. In chapter 1 Paul addresses that a true Christian demonstrates a work produced by faith, labour prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw how much he loved this community. In chapter 2, Paul reminds us that our calling is to live lives worthy of God by growing in boldness, purity and love. And Paul encourages the believers in Thessalonica to continue to live out their calling by faith as the word of God is at work in them. So we get to today’s text. Follow along as I read.

[Read the Text]

This is the word of God. Today's passage address the believers and the Church.

There are three main point I want to address today:

1. Paul's reaction to his concern (3:1-5),
2. Paul's reason for rejoicing (3:6-9) and,
3. Paul's response to this joy (3:10-13).

As we go through the text, ask yourself, "What is God trying to teach me about what the community of believer should be like?"

POINT 1: PAUL'S REACTION TO HIS CONCERN (3:1-5)

It's been a while since looking at 1 Thessalonians. So I think it'd be helpful if you went back and read the first two chapters again. It would take like 5 minutes. Paul just finished taking the time to write about how, as Christians, and as the body of Christ, the gospel is at work in our lives to strengthen and encourage us in our faith. And we know that ever since Paul became a Christian, persecution and suffering followed him. And not only him, but everywhere the gospel was preached and accepted, people were being attacked and threatened. Paul spends considerable time defending the gospel and what it means to live as Christians. He starts his letter by saying in 1:3, "We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." He tells the believers that they were imitators (1:6) and became a model to all the believers (1:7). The gospel was spreading everywhere. They turned away from idols and served the living and true God (1:9). They witnessed the opposition and challenges Paul, Silas and Timothy faced when they were with the believers in Thessalonica. And now, Paul was exhorting them to love, care for, encourage, comfort, and urge one another to live lives worthy of God (2:7-12).

Paul takes the time to remind them of all of this. Why? Because he experienced, firsthand, what happens when someone gives their life to follow Jesus: They will face trials. Even though he left the city knowing that a Christian community was formed, he didn't know how they were doing in the present. Think about this. Imagine hearing the gospel for the first time. And by God's grace, you believed the good news of Jesus Christ. And you gave your life to following Jesus. Paul and his companions were only able to stay with these new believers for a few weeks. They were all very new to the faith! Some of us grew up in the church and have heard hundreds of sermons and teachings about the gospel. But imagine



you were walking down a street, or walking on campus, and got the opportunity to share with someone about Jesus. And they received it well and believed. But then there's not much follow up after that. A foundation of faith has not been established. There's no rooting and maturing of their faith. Sure, having Paul teach and equip you for three weeks would have been amazing. But the missionaries had to flee suddenly, and the Christians were left leaderless without guidance.

So, just imagine how Paul, Silas and Timothy felt. They probably felt terrible for having to leave their new brothers and sisters. They probably thought the people felt abandoned by them. They were concerned as to how they were doing. They knew that the enemy, Satan, would be doing anything to discourage and destroy all those who followed Jesus. They feared that trials and persecutions may lead the Christians astray.

And so, we get to chapter 3. This part of Paul's letter shows a sense of urgency. Their anxiety became intolerable that they "could stand it no longer" (v.1). Even though it was dangerous to go back, the three missionaries felt it necessary for them to find out how their brothers and sisters were doing. So they sent Timothy. And there are three purposes to Timothy be sent. Look with me starting from verse 2: "We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials" (vv.2-3a). And then skip to verse 5: "For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith" (v.5a). Did you catch the three purposes, or reasons?

The first was to strengthen the believers. The second was to encourage them. Now, the two does overlap in some ways. When you're encouraged, you're strengthened. And when you're strengthened, you're encouraged. ILLUSTRATION: When someone is inspiring you and giving you a pep talk, you're encouraged and it gives you the strength to push forward. When you work out and you build strength and muscles, you're encouraged and feel confident about your body and health. These two verbs go together. But it's a little different.

Strengthening the Thessalonian believers was necessary because there would have been some who may have struggled. Some who didn't know what to do. Others who were weak or too new to being a Christian. They needed strength. But others needed encouragement. Why? Oppression and hardships were bombarding all believers. They would have been discouraged and possibly feeling a sense of defeat. They needed encouragement. Timothy's message to the believers would have been something like this: "You're doing great! Continue doing what you're doing! But do so more and more. Keep growing. Don't stop! Fight the good fight!"

Timothy was sent to strengthen and encourage the believers in their faith. Why? Verse 3: "...so that no one would be unsettled by these trials". The word "unsettled" has an image of a dog wagging its tail. It means "to flatter". Another translation uses the word "deceive".



Christians were being urged to abandon the faith, promising that their persecution would end if they do so. Think of what the enemies of the Gospel were saying to the new believers in Thessalonica to deceive them:

“We can fully understand how you were led astray by these foreigners who came from Philippi. You were led to believe that they had your best interest at heart. But their sudden departure and failure to return clearly proves that they don’t care about you at all. Also, think of all the things you’re going through now. You’ve gone after a false god and you’re being punished for it. Why did you turn away from what you believed? Rejoin us. If you do, all the hardships will go away. There will be no more pain. We will

take care of you. And we can all forget about this Jesus and everything that has happened.”

Listen to what a commentator says, “The devil is often more dangerous when he fawns [crawls or sneakily creeps around] than when he roars: David won the victory over Satan in the field of battle (1 Sam. 17:49), but in the cool of the evening on the housetop Satan won the victory over David.”

APPLICATION: Brothers and sisters, how is the enemy, how is Satan deceiving you to make it appealing to turn your back away from God? How is Satan working to discourage you?

Paul reminds all the believers (including us) that we are destined for trials (v.4). He says “For you know quite well” meaning that they’ve been told repeatedly that this would happen; that suffering and persecution is guaranteed when following Jesus. When Paul was with the people, the people witnessed the trials. And verse 4, “it turned out that way” for the Christians as well. Afflictions are not to be taken as something strange and unusual for the believer. Affliction is no accident; it is an integral part of the life of the Christian.

But here’s a message of hope: Since we are told that we will go through trials and persecution, we are also being prepared to face them. Persecution that has been planned by God in His love and that happens “according to plan” should strengthen faith. The hope was that Timothy would go and strengthen and encourage the believers to prevent them from being deceived in the midst of their afflictions. Brothers and sisters, what are you struggling with now? What are the trials you are facing? Could it be that God wants to use it to strengthen your faith?

Ok, so the first two purposes of Timothy being sent was to strengthen and encourage. The third reason was for Paul and his companions to find out about their faith. They knew that their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ were probably suffering severe persecution. But they wondered how they were handling it. Because with such trials and hardships, the fear is that “in some way the tempter had tempted you” (v.5) and caused some to turn away from their faith. This fear is understandable. Think of the timeline of what had happened,



First, Paul and his companions entered Thessalonica with the heart of evangelism to preach and spread the gospel. During their short stay, many people accepted the gospel and became very excited about Jesus. But the question was, “Was this just an emotional reaction or was it genuine faith?” Don’t we ask that in our own lives? When we come back from retreats or conferences, aren’t we wondering if our faith is/was genuine? Ok, but then, Paul and his companions are forced to leave. In their absence, the missionaries wonder about the faith of the believers. Persecution hits and persists. So, they wonder, “Will the Christians endure the afflictions because of their genuine faith? Or will they crumble under the trials? Timothy is sent to find out. And we will get to this next, but he returns with an encouraging report! They are enduring! Their faith seems genuine! So as soon as he hears this, Paul sits down and writes this

letter saying, “We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul started with a deep concern (possibly even a fear) for the people. Paul’s reaction to his concern sent Timothy to Thessalonica to strengthen and encourage and to report back about their faith. That’s the first point. But God was at work in the lives of the believers. Which leads to the second point: Paul’s reason for rejoicing.

POINT 2: PAUL’S REASON FOR REJOICING (3:6-9)

Can you hear Paul’s joy and excitement? In verse 6 he writes, “But Timothy has just now come to us from you...” Paul wrote his letter immediately. Timothy brought “good news about your faith and love”. Notice, whenever the New Testament uses the phrase “good news”, it’s almost always talking about the gospel. This is the only time where this phrase is used in any other way than God’s saving work. But here, you sense how much Paul was affected by what he heard. Timothy reports that the faith and love of the Thessalonians endure even in the midst of persecution, which means their faith is genuine. But also, they “always have pleasant memories of [them]” and they “long to see [the missionaries]” (v.6). Their longing and love were mutual!

Paul is so overjoyed that he says in verse 7, “in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.” Let me just pause here for a moment. Throughout the week, I couldn’t help but wonder how amazing it would be if we all felt this way about one another. Could you imagine a community where each person’s genuine faith and love affects one another in this way? The reason for Paul’s joy was the faith and love of his brothers and sisters. How beautiful is that! The joy was so strong and powerful that it brought encouragement and comfort even amidst distress and suffering. Brothers and sisters, I want our community to be like this: We’re so affected by one another that we strengthen and encourage each other as we witness deepening of faith and love. As we do



life together, we can endure the hardships that the enemy brings into our lives. What a beautiful description of what and how the Church, the people of God, must be.

Paul continues in verse 8: “For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.” Do you sense the depth of his joy? Pause and think about what he just said. Verse 8 is a combination of two ideas:

1. We live if you stand firm in the Lord and,
2. Now we live seeing that you are standing firm in the Lord.

What does this mean? Paul is saying that whenever the Thessalonians stand firm in the Lord, rooted in Him, trusting Him, loving Him, finding hope in Him, those who preached and brought the gospel to them really live, being filled with joy and gratitude. And now, that joy is a reality for Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Have you ever shared the gospel with someone, been praying for someone, walked and journeyed with someone, and then saw them growing in their

faith, in their love for God and others, and in the hope they have in Christ? How does that make you feel? Would you not be overjoyed that God has saved them and sanctifying them?

Coupled with this blessed joy for Paul is thanksgiving. We see that in verse 9: How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?” This is a rhetorical question. Paul is flooded with gratitude to God. Note that. He gives thanks to God. He doesn’t thank the believers for their genuine faith. He knows that it is only by God’s grace and steadfast love that leads anyone to the saving knowledge of, and faith in, Christ. So it is appropriate that our gratitude is directed to God. Because of what God is doing in the faith of the Thessalonians, Paul, Silas and Timothy’s hearts are revived. They have a new lease on life.

Paul’s joy overflows in his letter. And we see his reasons for rejoicing. But how does he respond to this joy? This is our final point.

POINT 3: PAUL’S RESPONSE TO THIS JOY (3:10-13)

Look with me in verse 10. It says, “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith”. Paul’s joy and thanksgiving is followed by prayer. ILLUSTRATION: New Year’s Threefold Prayer Initiative.



Paul says they're praying night and day with great earnestness and urgency. They're praying unceasingly and fervently. And what is their prayer? That they may see the believers again. Why? So that they can supply what is lacking in their faith. The missionaries are overjoyed by the faith that is being demonstrated. But there's always room to grow and a need to deepen and mature your faith. No matter where you are in your faith, we will always be lacking; needing to add to and grow. The verb "supply" means "to knit together" or "to unite". Now, I don't knit. But you get the picture, right? You start with a needle and yarn. And you begin to twist and loop or whatever you do. And a shape begins to form. For the new believers in Thessalonica, they have just begun. They are no where near a finished product. So the apostles' prayer was that God would allow them to see them again in order to teach and equip them with God's Word and foundations to build upon their faith.

Now, the last three verses of today's texts are prayers, or wishes, Paul has for the believers. He's lifting these prayers to God, but at the same time, sharing his heart and wish for the people. Verse 11: "Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you". That's connected to the apostles' desire to meet with the people again. Satan was preventing them from doing so. Therefore, a prayer is lifted that God would make a way. Now, we trust that God can do this. But as we move into the next prayer, Paul realizes that the spiritual growth of the Thessalonian believers can still happen even if they are not able to meet them again. Their growth is not dependant on them. It is God that will help them grow.

The second prayer is this, which is found in verse 12: "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you." I can picture Paul thinking this: "As for the three of us, we would love to go back and be able to see you. Our hope is that God will make a way for us to be reunited so that we can teach and equip you to grow in your faith. However, whether or not we see you again, we pray that You, Lord, will cause their love to increase and overflow for one another and for everyone else, just as we love them." Who is their love to increase and overflow for? One another, which were the fellow believers. But Paul's prayer for love extends to everyone else.

APPLICATION: Brothers and sisters, is your love increasing and overflowing for one another? Even during this pandemic where it's so difficult to meet in-person, how is your love expanding and deepening more and more. And it doesn't end there. How is your love growing for everyone around you? From your family and friends, to your neighbours, co-workers, classmates, and anyone to come across.

We finally get to the last verse: "May He strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all His holy one" (v.13). The purpose of this increasing and overflowing love is so that the Lord may strengthen your hearts, in order that you would be made blameless and holy, or set apart. It is through this love that God strengthens us. And he strengthens our hearts so that we are



not prone to wander or deceived, but rather be reformed and shaped into the likeness of Christ more and more. And we will continue to be transformed until the day our Lord comes again; the day in which we wait, with great hope, for all the pain and sorrows, the hardships and sufferings, the afflictions and persecution, to be no more. And we, with all God's holy people, will for all eternity, be with our Lord. We rejoice knowing that the Lord was the One who brought brothers and sisters into our lives to strengthen and encourage us so that our faith would grow, not lacking anything.