

"The Blessing of Encouragement" - 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Sometimes, folks just need to be encouraged. This life can be challenging. It seems like there is no end to disappointments and sometimes, the tribulations of this life can be overwhelming. As a Christian, you are not immune. In fact, in many cases, the trials and tribulations you face as a believer are much worse. We shouldn't be surprised, because once you accept Jesus as your Lord, Savior, and Friend, you immediately gain 3 enemies. Satan doesn't like your salvation one bit, and he has great wrath, knowing his time is short. He's against you. But you also have the world's fallen culture militating against your faith and if that weren't enough, you still have your own sin nature. If Paul could cry:

O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?
(Romans 7:24)

We certainly can understand our own continuing struggle with sin. It is easy to become discouraged. Christian workers become discouraged too. Pastors become discouraged. The great Apostle Paul was sometimes discouraged.

His ministry was not easy. There was much opposition to his message of hope. Many of his fellow Jews considered him to be a heretic and the pagans really hated what he had to say. He paid the price. To the Corinthians, he wrote:

*From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: **my deep concern for all the churches.** (2 Corinthians 11:24-28)*

Paul had a burden for the churches he established. It was this deep concern that was keeping Paul up at night as he ministered in Athens and then in Corinth. He couldn't help thinking about the baby Christians he was forced to leave behind in Thessalonica. They appeared to have accepted the Gospel, but was it just an emotional reaction, or was it genuine faith? Paul knew the persecution was going to continue. Would the Thessalonians endure for the sake of Christ? Would they understand that tribulation and persecution is not contrary to God's plan?

Paul just had to know, so he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how they were doing and to minister to their spiritual needs. When Timothy caught up with Paul, he brought a glowing report. The Thessalonians were persevering in their faith.

There is nothing more encouraging to a pastor. I know from first-hand experience. Sometimes you just wonder if your ministry is at all effective. Am I really producing fruit for the kingdom? Am I being faithful to my calling?

Well, God is faithful, even when I am not. Just when you need it the most, He always provides the blessing of encouragement.

Let's go to our text now.

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you—therefore, brethren, in

all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. (1 Thessalonians 3:6-7)

In verse 6, there is a pretty dramatic shift from concern to joy. Paul was worried about these folks! He was worried lest by some means the tempter had tempted them, and his labor might be in vain. (Verse 5) But Timothy brought great news.

And I want you to notice something: Paul uses the phrase “*Timothy has come to us from you*”. He could have said “Timothy returned”, but I think it is very significant that the Thessalonians sent him back. He was sent as Paul’s representative but he is returning as the Thessalonian’s representative as well.

He found out that they missed Paul as much as Paul missed them.

... you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you ...

Genuine conversion yields mutual love among the saints. We talked about that two weeks ago. As Christians, we are family and we miss one another when we’re gone. So, the fact that the Thessalonians wanted to see Paul testified to their authentic conversion.

Paul was greatly comforted by this, and encouraged. He was comforted ... *in all our affliction and distress ...* The difficulties of ministry were still in evidence while Paul was in Corinth. Aside from the constant persecution, he labored hard for the Gospel. Although he had every right to expect support from Corinthian Christians.

Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. (1 Timothy 5:17)

He instead supported himself by making tents and then preached late into the night in his “free” time. It was difficult and exhausting, but hearing this report from Timothy, he was thinking “Hey, it’s all worth it!”

For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 3:8)

This is a curious statement, and might be a bit confusing. It is a conditional statement, that could be turned around to say: “If you stand fast in the Lord, then we live.”

Is Paul referring to eternal life here? And when he writes “We”, is he referring to himself along with the other evangelists, Timothy and Silas, or is he including the Thessalonians and by extension, all believers?

I spent an awful lot of time on this as I studied. While there is some disagreement among scholars and commentators, I think the “We” refers to Paul and his partners in ministry and “live” is not talking about eternal life, but is rather talking about the quality of life Paul enjoys. To paraphrase, I believe Paul is saying “Because you guys are standing fast in the Lord, it rejuvenates us and we are really living.”

This is an expression of profound joy. “You guys are really saved! That’s a load off my mind! And it makes my life and my work worthwhile. I can’t tell you how much this thrills me. I am comforted; I am encouraged; and it has given me just the charge I needed to keep going!

Of course, all of the praise, honor and glory must go to Almighty God. You know, don’t you, that you are saved by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone? Jesus is the Author and the Finisher of our faith. (Hebrews 12:2)

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Because the Thessalonians had demonstrated their authentic faith through authentic love for Paul and the brethren, Paul knew that God had graciously given them the faith to believe. *Soli Deo Gloria*; To God alone be the glory!

For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God, night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith? (1 Thessalonians 3:9-10)

Paul's soul is absolutely flooded with overwhelming gratitude to God. At the same time, he is painfully aware that he cannot possibly express his thanksgiving in an adequate way. What thanks can we render to God for the manifest blessings He pours out?

If you have any conception of God's immaculate holiness, if you realize just how sinful you are in light of His holiness, if you understand just how far God has gone to save you, how can you possibly thank Him enough? God loves you! Despite your rebellion, your stiff necks and your continuing sinfulness, God loves you.

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

And although ... *the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)* Do you believe that? Isn't it amazing? All you have to do is add faith; and God will even give you that. Just ask.

For "WHOEVER CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD SHALL BE SAVED." (Romans 10:13)

Can you make that confession? "Jesus is my Lord?" Can you believe that God raised Him from the dead? That's all it takes. How can you possibly thank Him enough?

Paul wasn't just thanking God for the Thessalonian's faith, though. He wanted more! And it's okay to ask God for even more blessing. Paul was praying exceedingly, day and night. He had two specific petitions: That the Lord would let him see the Thessalonians again, and that He would be able to perfect what was lacking in their faith. Because although they had saving faith, but there were still some deficiencies.

Isn't that the way it is with you? That's how it is with me. God's not done with me yet. There are a lot of improvements needed. There is a lot of Biblical knowledge I still need help with. There is so much I don't understand.

So, Paul continued to pray for these Christians up in Southeast Europe. In this letter, He tells them how he is praying.

You might call verses 11-13 a doxology, as many commentators do. It is very much like a prayer. But it isn't a prayer in that it is not addressed directly to God. This is more like a blessing. He is simply communicating to these Christians how he intends to continue in prayer.

Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the

coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints. (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13)

Let's unpack these separate petitions briefly.

First, Paul wants to return to Thessalonica, that the Lord would *direct our way to you*. Paul really thought that he could do more good face-to-face, but at the same time, Paul was a man who always yielded to the leading of the Holy Spirit. We need to have the same attitude, admitting that we don't always know how to pray as we ought. (Romans 8:26)

Secondly, Paul wanted the Thessalonians to grow in their love for one another. That's the mark of a Christian, you know.

By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

Finally, Paul wanted the Lord to establish their hearts in holiness. The word translated establish is *stērizō* (στηρίζω), which means to "make fast" or to set. He wants them to be unwavering in their commitment to obedience. We need to be the same, striving for obedience, studying God's word to find out what the Lord requires of us, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, working out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Notice, though, that it is God who must do the work. You can't do it on your own. But you can cooperate with the Holy Spirit as He works to conform you to the image of Jesus Christ. We Christians are to be imitators of our Lord. (Ephesians 5:1)

As I read this passage of scripture, I'm taken by how encouraged Paul was by Timothy's report. He gave thanks and glory to God for their steadfastness and their progress in faith, but he also prayed that the process of sanctification would continue.

We all need encouragement from time to time. I'm encouraged that we have a congregation of encouragers. We do! What a blessing! As we dealt with the passing of Kris' mother this week, we were overwhelmed by the love and support we received from you folks. Thank you! And praise the Lord for giving us the privilege of serving at Canyon Community Church.

Let us never forget how important it is to encourage others. God bless every one of you, and *Soli Deo Gloria!*