

Week 4: 1 Thessalonians 3

Hook



Main Point: Knowing that the Thessalonians' faith was solid was the greatest joy and comfort for Paul and his coworkers.

Early on in the pandemic, we heard over and over again the phrase, “we’re in this together.” Not so sure how “together” we were, but it’s a great thought.

But the phrase certainly rings true in the Christian context. As the Church, the body of Christ, we really are “in this together” in that we need each other’s encouragement as we strive to live for and honor God in the way we live. We need Christian community and the accountability that comes with it.

Q: How have you been encouraged in the last week or month by another believer or friend from church?

Q: How has he/she been an encouragement to another?

Transition: As we move into today’s lesson, we’re given a great example in the life of Paul as he genuinely cared and was concerned for the Thessalonians.

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Book

Main Point: Knowing that the Thessalonians' faith was solid was the greatest joy and comfort for Paul and his coworkers.

1 Thessalonians 3:1–5 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Faithful pastors strengthen and encourage their flocks.

Q: Why were Paul and his coworkers so concerned about the Thessalonians?

Q: What does the repetition of “when we/I could bear it no longer” make you think about how Paul and his coworkers felt about the Thessalonians?

In this passage, Paul is still giving some background on events that happened before this letter was written. As he earlier described the way he and his coworkers behaved with the Thessalonians when they first witnessed to them, he now describes the process of sending Timothy back to check on them. This is still part of the very long thanksgiving/narrative section of the letter.

Paul had communicated his and his companions' deep love for the Thessalonians, describing their gentle care for them like that of a nursing mother, their loving encouragement like that of a father, and their sharing their whole lives with them (2:1–12). Paul shared how intensely he longed to be with the Thessalonians again. Paul had made every effort to see them, but Satan had thwarted every attempt (2:17–20). This section continues that same intense emotion. Twice Paul says, “*When we/I could stand it no longer...*” Paul couldn't bear this worry about the Thessalonians. He trusted God to be with the Thessalonians and give them strength, but the apostle had the same kind of longing a parent would have for a child who was away and going through difficult times. Imagine if your child was away at college and was struggling through a challenging situation. Wouldn't you move mountains to be with him or her?

Paul had tried numerous times to go to Thessalonica and wasn't able to get there, but he believed Timothy could make it there on his own. While Paul and Silvanus were both full Jews, Timothy was half Greek and could more likely blend into a Greek city without being noticed. Paul and Silvanus would have drawn attention as they did in Philippi, where they were dragged before the magistrates, attacked, beaten, and thrown in prison for “disturbing the city” by “*advocating customs that were against Roman law*” (Acts 16:19–24). So Paul and Silvanus stayed in Athens and sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage the Thessalonians in their faith (3:2).ⁱ

Why was Paul so worried? The Thessalonians were going through persecution, and even though Paul and his coworkers had told them to expect it, he was worried they would turn away from the faith as a result (vv. 3–5). Paul reminded them that persecution is part of the package for Christians – we are *destined* for it (v. 3). As he wrote in Romans, we share in Jesus’ sufferings now in the certain hope of sharing in His glory in heaven. And the sufferings of this life are nothing compared to the glory of the next (Romans 8:17–18).ⁱⁱ

Paul was afraid that the tempter (Satan) had tempted them to give up on their faith. As Satan was the one who had been hindering Paul from coming to the Thessalonians, he deduced that Satan was also trying to tempt them to abandon their faith (v. 5).

Paul often uses the phrase “laboring/running in vain” (Galatians 2:2, 4:11; Philippians 2:16). This doesn’t mean Paul regretted his attempts to convert the Thessalonians or believed if they did turn away, that God would hold him accountable for their choice. He knew he was responsible only for planting and watering the seeds of faith. It is God who makes them grow (1 Corinthians 3:7). “Laboring/running in vain” comes from the book of Isaiah, when Isaiah cried out to God, *“I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity”* (Isaiah 49:4). Isaiah gave his whole life to preaching repentance to Israel, yet they did not repent.

The prophets all had moments such as this, when they felt their preaching was pointless because no one was listening. Yet they persevered because it was their calling from the Lord. Isaiah continued, *“Yet what is due me is in the Lord’s hand, and my reward is with my God”* (Isaiah 49:4 NIV). No matter the tangible outcome of his preaching, God would determine the faithfulness of his ministry. Paul wrote something similar. *“Each will receive his wages according to his labor ... each one’s work will become manifest ... it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done”* (1 Corinthians 3:8, 13). Paul wasn’t worried about whether God would consider his labor good enough; he just didn’t want the Thessalonians to turn away from their faith.ⁱⁱⁱ

Q: Think of someone in your life who is struggling and needs strength and encouragement right now. How can you encourage that person? How can you have the same passion for encouraging him or her that Paul and his coworkers had for the Thessalonians?

Q: In what ways do you feel as though Satan is trying to thwart your efforts in your life’s ministry and mission right now? How can you defend yourself spiritually?

1 Thessalonians 3:6–10 [Read]

Talking Point 2: The best news pastors can hear is that their flock is standing firm in the Lord.

Q: How do you think the news Timothy brought back to Paul made him feel?

Q: What comforted Paul and his coworkers as they suffered persecution?

Verses 6–10 create a chiasmic structure, a common literary tool used in Scripture, in which a sentence, verse, word or idea is repeated and developed but in reverse order:

- A. Benefit of apostolic presence (Timothy) for the writers (3:6–9)
- B. Prayer report regarding apostolic presence (all of them) (3:10a)
- A. Benefit of apostolic presence (all of them) for the recipients (3:10b)^{iv}

Though they remained close in heart no matter how far apart they were, there was a comfort and joy that came from physically being together. Paul received comfort in his affliction when Timothy came back with his report. The Thessalonians would receive what was lacking in their faith when Paul came to see them. The issues of past and present had been central from the beginning of the letter to 3:9, but now, 3:10 points toward the future.^v Verse 10 is the major turning point in the letter, and it shows us the letter's primary purpose. It would serve as an interim communication between Paul and the Thessalonians until his prayer was answered and they could be together again. When they were able to come, Paul would fill in the gaps in the Thessalonians' faith and answer any questions they might have. Until then, the apostle addressed the most urgent matters in this letter.^{vi}

Paul had been worried about how the Thessalonians were enduring persecution, but the news of their faith and love for Jesus and their longing to see the missionaries as much as the missionaries longed to see the Thessalonians assuages his fears (v. 6). Paul continues the intensity of his language when he says, "*For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord*" (v. 8). The Thessalonians' conversion wasn't just a momentary response to the Gospel but a true living faith that endured under persecution. Because their whole lives' purpose and desire was about the mission of spreading the Gospel, this news is the very breath of life to Paul and his coworkers. It was what they lived for. There was nothing for which Paul could thank God more (v. 9).^{vii}

Q: How does it feel for you to see your children or spiritual children walking faithfully with the Lord?

Q: What would you say is "the very breath of life" for you?

Q: What things bring you the most satisfaction, comfort and joy?

Q: In what ways is God calling you to change your life's mission and heart's desire to be consistent with the Great Commission?

1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Pastors pray earnestly for their flocks, night and day.

Q: What things did Paul pray for the Thessalonians?

Q: Why is it significant that Paul kept including God the Father and Jesus together?

In the last verse of the previous section (v. 10), Paul wrote that he prayed “*most earnestly night and day*” that he would be reunited with the Thessalonians. The Greek here literally means “exceedingly abundantly.” Though translated differently than in Ephesians 3:20 (“exceedingly abundantly”), *hyperekperissou* is the same as that used in 5:13 (“very highly”). Paul often used superlatives, such as superabundant grace of God in Romans 5:20 and superabundant joy in 2 Corinthians 7:4. The whole tone of the letter so far has been intense. They longed “*with great desire*” (2:17) to be reunited with the Thessalonians. They labored and toiled night and day (2:9). They thanked God constantly (2:13). They were “*torn away*” from the Thessalonians and “*endeavored the more eagerly*” to see them face to face (2:17).

And so we arrive at the conclusion – the prayer – of this very long opening thanksgiving. Ancient letters typically opened with a greeting, a thanksgiving, and a prayer. But in this letter, the thanksgiving is interrupted by several narrative sections, making the order thanksgiving (1:2–5a), narrative (1:5b–2:12), thanksgiving (2:13), narrative (2:14–3:8), thanksgiving (3:9–10), then, finally, prayer (3:11–13). Paul talked about praying “*exceedingly abundantly night and day,*” and here he actually prays for them. Commentator Gordon P. Wiles calls this a “wish prayer,” along with the second wish prayer in 5:23, because it is written in the optative rather than the imperative mood.^{viii} The optative mood expresses potential or wish.

In verse 11 the optative is expressed with “*may our God . . . direct our way to you*” and “*may the Lord make you increase.*” It’s not a command or demand but a hope, if it be God’s will.

At both the beginning and end of the prayer, Paul paired both God the Father and our Lord Jesus. Both the Father and the Son direct our way (v.11), make us increase in love (v. 12), make us holy (v. 13a), and ultimately judge us on the last day (v. 13b). The final

judgment is both “the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:10) and “the judgment seat of God” (Romans 14:10). Father and Son are one and the same. Christ is not just a great prophet or rabbi; He is God. This prayer is presented jointly to Father and Son.^{ix}

Notice what Paul and his coworkers prayed for:

- That God may bring them together again (v. 11)
- That their love would abound for each other and for all (v. 12)
- That God would make them holy and blameless (v. 13)

Paul was relieved that the Thessalonians had stood firm in their faith. But he prayed for even deeper and greater faith. He prayed first that the Lord would increase their love for one another (in Christian community) and for all (the world). Jesus said love was the sign of a disciple and how the world would know we are different (John 13:35). Paul wrote that without love, none of the religious stuff we do matters. It’s just empty ritual, just noise (1 Corinthians 13:1–3). It’s paramount that we pray for greater love.

Second, Paul prayed for God to establish the Thessalonians’ hearts as blameless. The heart is not only the seat of understanding and will (what modern readers think of as the mind) but the place where the hidden motives of life and conduct take shape – the deepest part of us.^x They prayed for the sanctification of their spiritual children, that God would change them from the inside out, making them more like Jesus. Not only so they would be blameless at the Day of Judgment, but so their lives would be full and exceedingly abundant here on earth (John 10:10).

Q: Are these the kinds of things we pray for our Christian friends and family? Or do we just stick to things such as illnesses, job interviews and travel safety?

Q: How would our lives, our church communities and the world change if we prayed for our love to increase, both for one another and for the world?

Q: How would our lives, our church communities and the world change if we prayed for one another’s sanctification, for God to change our hearts?

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Took

Main Point: Knowing that the Thessalonians' faith was solid was the greatest joy and comfort for Paul and his coworkers.

Ahead of time, prepare note cards and envelopes for each of your participants.

Take time at the close of your lesson to encourage participants to write a letter to someone who has made a difference in their life's journey as a believer. This could be a family member, pastor, teacher or a good friend. Encourage them to mail their notes of appreciation this week!

CHALLENGES

THINK: How has God used other people in your life to grow you in your faith? What specific things in your spiritual life do you owe to their teaching, mentoring, or modeling? How has He used you to grow others in their faith? How might God want to use you to spiritually parent others more? Which specific people in your life is God leading you to mentor?

PRAY for those who are suffering persecution around the world. Pray that they will feel comforted and encouraged by the Lord even while they are hurting. Pray for them to have strength, wisdom and perseverance. Pray that God will use them to bring their persecutors to faith in Jesus.

ACT: Take time this week to pray over the people to whom you wrote letters of encouragement. Pray that the recipients would be encouraged in the Lord that day. And, if possible, follow up with a phone call or a personal visit to thank them for the difference they made in your life. God will use this simple act of kindness and appreciation to bless those who have been a blessing in your life.

Hook, Took & Editing by Alan Moore

ⁱ Gordon Fee, *The First and Second Letter to the Thessalonians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2009).

ⁱⁱ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2002).

ⁱⁱⁱ Gordon Fee, *The First and Second Letter to the Thessalonians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2009).

^{iv} R. W. Funk, “The Apostolic Parousia: Form and Significance” in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 249–268.

^v Peter T. O’Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul*, NovTSup 49 (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

^{vi} Gordon P. Wiles, *Paul’s Intercessory Prayers: The Significance of the Intercessory Prayer Passages in the Letters of St. Paul, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 24* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 183–186.

^{vii} Gordon Fee, *The First and Second Letter to the Thessalonians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2009).

^{viii} Gordon P. Wiles, *Paul’s Intercessory Prayers: The Significance of the Intercessory Prayer Passages in the Letters of St. Paul, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 24* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 52.

^{ix} Gordon Fee, *The First and Second Letter to the Thessalonians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2009).

^x Gordon Fee, *The First and Second Letter to the Thessalonians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2009).