



1 Thessalonians - Chapter Three

II. 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3:13 - Thanksgiving and Encouragement (continues/concludes)

II.c 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5 - Paul's Desire to Visit the Thessalonians Again (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Three

Paul gives further evidence of his love to the Thessalonians, reminding them of his sending Timothy to them, with the mention of his design therein and his inducements so to do (vv.1-5). He acquaints them also with his great satisfaction at the return of Timothy, with good tidings concerning them (vv.6-10), and then concludes with fervent prayer for them (vv.11-13).

¹ Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens;

1 Thessalonians 3:1

When we could bear it no longer. Despite the teaching of Jesus not to worry about anything in Matthew 6:25-34, something reiterated by Paul himself: <<*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God*>> (Philippians 4:6), Paul did have anxieties over the church: <<*And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches*>> (2 Corinthians 11:28), because he feared they may give into the pressure they faced from those outside the church who were persecuting them.

The sending of Timothy was due to Paul's inability to endure any longer his separation from the Thessalonians, and not knowing how they were doing. Moreover, it was a sacrificial act, reflecting deep pastoral love, since Paul was left alone in Athens: <<*Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him*>> (Acts 17:15). Although he was probably in the company of Luke and therefore uses the plural we; refer also to the comments that were made on that verse.

² and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, ³ so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. ⁴ In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know.

1 Thessalonians 3:2-4

Co-worker for God is a remarkably lofty title yet it fits well with Paul's understanding of mission: <<*For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building*>> (1 Corinthians 3:9). Paul seems to be highlighting Timothy's credentials to offset any negative sentiment on the part of the Thessalonians at Paul's sending his junior associate to them instead of coming himself.

To strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Paul's motive for sending Timothy was to strengthen the persecuted Thessalonians: <<*This is evidence of the righteous judgement of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering. For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels*>> (2 Thessalonians 1:5-7). They will be shaken by their trials if they are not rooted in the Gospel: <<*But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away*>> (Mark 4:17), although Jesus shows they should not fear their persecutors: <<*I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!*>> (John 16:33).

This is what we are destined for. Christians are destined to suffer tribulation for their faith: <<*Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life*>> (Mark 10:29-30), <<*it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us*>> (Romans 8:16-18), <<*Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*>> (2 Timothy 3:12), and: <<*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed*>> (1 Peter 4:12-13). Apparently and understandably the Thessalonians had been taken aback by the unrelenting persecution they were facing from both Jews and Gentiles.

We told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution. Paul had suffered persecution from the outset of his ministry in Damascus, which is precisely what he was led to expect at the time of his calling for Jesus had told Ananias: <<*I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name*>> (Acts 9:16).

⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain.

1 Thessalonians 3:5

I sent. By the time he reached Athens Paul could no longer bear the uncertainty of what had happened in Macedonia, so he sent two of his co-workers back to find out. Verse 6 will show that they arrived back by the time Paul had moved on to Corinth: <<*When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus*>> (Acts 18:5).

To find out about your faith. The word faith can also mean faithfulness, loyalty or allegiance, and is the key word here as it was in v.2. All these meanings seem to be operating simultaneously. What Paul was afraid of was compromise, of the Thessalonians abandoning their firm grasp on the Gospel, their unswerving loyalty to Christ as their new Lord and Saviour.

For Paul, faith is partly about a person's trust in God and the Gospel; partly about their belief in the central Gospel events, particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus; and partly about their continuing faithfulness to the God who has revealed himself in these events and in the Gospel message about them. And it is the central, if complex, quality that is likely to be under attack when the church is facing persecution.

The tempter. Satan had tempted Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13, and continues to tempt Christians: <<*Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control*>> (1 Corinthians 7:5).

The bible shows how Satan had tempted Eve in the Garden and Jesus in the wilderness by questioning the will and power of God. When persecution comes, either directly to a person or simply in the lives of apparently innocent people somewhere else in the world, then the questions of the tempter can be heard. Can a loving God really allow such things to happen? Does he really have the power to overcome such evil and, if so, why does he apparently sit back and do nothing? Does he exist at all? Yet Paul knows that the sufferings the Thessalonians are enduring are not a strange thing that means God is no longer reliable. They are precisely what one should expect when one is following the crucified Messiah!

Our labour had been in vain. If Satan had succeeded in tempting the Thessalonians to abandon their newfound faith, Paul's missionary work would have been fruitless, although it is never pointless.

II.d 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13 - Timothy's Encouraging Report

Paul outlines his distress as he waited for Timothy's report, his relief and thanksgiving upon learning the good news about the Thessalonian Christians, and his longing to see them again.

Paul concludes his thanksgiving and encouragement (1:3-3:13) with a pastoral prayer for his converts. He prays that he may be able to revisit the community (v.11), and that the Thessalonians will abound in love (v.12), with the result that they will be blamelessly holy at Jesus' Second Coming (v.13).

The fact that holiness will characterise those who participate in the Second Coming lends urgency to Paul's teaching on sexual holiness in 4:3-8. In 5:23-24 Paul assures the Thessalonians that God will produce the necessary holiness in them.

⁶ But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us – just as we long to see you.

1 Thessalonians 3:6

Timothy has just now come to us from you. As soon as Timothy returned from Thessalonica, Paul composed his first letter to the Thessalonians. Timothy had reported good news concerning the Thessalonians' faith and love - strikingly, there is no mention of hope here, refer to 4:13 and its associated comments - and that the Thessalonians long to see Paul and his other co-workers. Paul reassuringly reiterates that he also longs to see them: <<*As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you – in person, not in heart – we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again – but Satan blocked our way*>> (1 Thessalonians 2:17-18).

The word Paul uses for good news is the same as the one he uses when proclaiming the Gospel message. His relief at hearing that all is well in Thessalonica, in terms of their faith and perseverance at least, was as if he were hearing and receiving the Gospel message again for the first time.

Faith and love. Paul is not only delighted to hear of their faithfulness but about their love. This love - Paul here is focusing of the reciprocal love between the missionaries and the church, but in the next chapter he will also speak about their love for one another - was truly one of the astonishing things in the early church. In the early church there were people from different social statuses and backgrounds sharing in the same love that was normally only seen within close family relationships. This was a dramatic sign of God's work through the Holy Spirit within this community, and one that Paul regularly celebrated with all the church groups that he communicated with.

⁷ For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith.

1 Thessalonians 3:7

During all our distress and persecution. The missionaries, like the Thessalonians, are continuing in their suffering for Christ. Yet they are not discouraged because their faith is strong and is made even stronger by the report they have now received from Timothy, i.e. we have been encouraged about you through your faith.

⁸ For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. ⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

1 Thessalonians 3:8-10

For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. Paul truly comes alive when he knows that the Gospel is working so powerfully in the church plants that he loved so passionately. He calls the church to persevere in their faith, something that was needed just as much in Corinth from where he wrote this letter: <<**Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong**>> (1 Corinthians 16:13).

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Paul gives thanks for Timothy's great news and then highlights, by means of a prayer report, his eagerness for a return visit to Thessalonica. When Paul has spoken of his initial meeting with the Thessalonians, his work among them, his anxiety after his departure and his joy at the good news about them that he has just received, he is not simply reminiscing but demonstrating, as he has done from the outset of this letter, his genuine thanksgiving to God and the joy it brings him, at the work that God has been doing in his church.

Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face. In 2:9 Paul has already stated how he worked physically hard night and day to support the missionaries with their own daily needs. He now shows that the other driving force in his life is to maintain a constant prayer vigil with God, with requests that the way would be open for him to return to Thessalonica if it is the Lord's will.

The word Paul uses for his prayer is a rare one, meaning more or less 'even more exceedingly that you can imagine'. This demonstrates just how fervent Paul was in his prayers to God, perhaps reminiscent of Jesus praying in the Garden during the night before his crucifixion: <<**In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground**>> (Luke 22:44).

Restore whatever is lacking in your faith. Due to their premature departure from Thessalonica, the missionaries had been unable to complete their usual instruction of Christians in the fundamentals of the faith. One particular lack in their instruction related to the Second Coming and the final resurrection, as Paul illustrates in 4:13-18.

Paul is not necessarily indicating that they are lacking in faith, just that their faith needs to grow day by day as they become ever closer in their personal relationship with God through Jesus. Paul's desire to see them again is so that he can strengthen their faith by further teaching about those aspects of the Gospel that they have not yet managed to comprehend.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹² And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³ And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

Paul prays that our God and Father, along with the Lord Jesus direct, increase and strengthen believers, which is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit, thus making this a Trinitarian request.

Paul demonstrates that prayer is an exploration into the very heart of God, not so much for the sake of the joy of being there, but for the sake of bringing before God the church and the world, all their combined issues, all those who need his healing love. This is something Paul would later indicate in his letter to the church in Ephesus: <<Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen>> (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Direct our way to you. Just as Paul knows that it was the work of Satan that had blocked his return to Thessalonica (2:18), he is also acutely aware that it would only be by the will of God for his return to be made possible. After all, it was by the direction of the Spirit that Paul had arrived in Troas where he received the vision of the Man of Macedonia, allowing him to travel into the region in the first place and thus establish the churches there: <<They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas>> (Acts 16:6-8).

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all. Paul's prayer was in line with the will of God for it reflected the call of Christ on the lives of all: <<And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself">> (Matthew 22:39), and: <<I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another'>> (John 13:34-35). Elsewhere, Paul writes: <<Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law>> (Romans 13:10). Paul confirms this as a two-way relationship: i.e. just as we abound in love for you.

Strengthen your hearts in holiness is a request that indicates the process of sanctification is ongoing for those who are in Christ Jesus: <<But now that you

have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life>> (Romans 6:22).

That you may be blameless before our God and Father was the primary purpose of God sending his Son to die on the Cross, for his sacrifice was the only means by which humans could be seen as worthy in the sight of God to enter his presence: <<*See, God will not reject a blameless person, nor take the hand of evildoers>> (Job 8:20), <<O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbours>> (Psalm 15:1-3), <<And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless>> (Philippians 1:9-10), <<And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him>> (Colossians 1:22).*

With all his saints refers to angels, Christians, or most likely both, for Greek *hagios* is plural here and means 'holy ones'. This verse may well be an allusion to one of the significant Messianic end times verses in the OT: <<*And you shall flee by the valley of the Lord's mountain, for the valley between the mountains shall reach to Azal; and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of King Uzziah of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him>> (Zechariah 14:5).*

On the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus refer to 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, 1 Peter 4:7, and 2 Peter 3:2-18, as well as Jesus' own words: <<*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory>> (Matthew 25:31), and: <<The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!>> (Revelation 22:20).*

This brief but powerful prayer thus draws together all that Paul has said so far in this letter, and prepares the ground for the particular practical and theological points he wants to make in what is to come.