

V. Timothy to the Rescue!

November 3/4, 2010

1 Thessalonians 3:1-10

Aim: To emulate Paul in his concern for fellow believers, in his rejoicing at good news from other Christians, and in his prayers for the improvement of their faith.

A. Paul Sends Timothy to Thessalonica (1 Th. 3:1-5)

Paul had a number of interrelated motivations for sending Timothy to Thessalonica. In the first place, he was emotionally concerned for the well-being of the Thessalonian church (vv. 1, 5). Secondly, he desired for them to continue in the faith through the ministry of Timothy (v. 2). Thirdly, he was concerned that the Thessalonians might have been negatively influenced by news about his tribulations (vv. 3-4).

1. Personal Sacrifice (3:1)

Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone...

The passage opens with ‘therefore’ (*διό, dio*) which specifically links it to the closing section of the previous chapter. Because of Paul’s attitude toward the Thessalonian believers—‘For you are our glory and joy’ (2:20)—he could no longer tolerate his distance from his spiritual children and the consequent lack of knowledge of their condition. Paul’s strong affection for them resulted in intense emotional pain during this forced separation. Paul’s affection was more than mere sentimental love; his desire was to help the Thessalonians fulfill God’s calling to be loyal to the truth and to experience spiritual maturity in their lives.

At this point in Paul’s reconstruction of the historical events, he and Timothy are in Athens. It is plain that Athens was but a temporary halting-stage on the way from Thessalonica to Corinth. Paul initially came to Athens without Silas and Timothy (Acts 17:14), but they eventually joined him there. When it became clear that Paul could not go to Thessalonica in person, he sent Timothy instead to determine their condition (v. 5). Paul apparently dispatched Silas somewhere else in Macedonia, perhaps Philippi (cp. Acts 18:5; 2 Cor. 11:9; Phil. 4:15). Thus for a second time, Paul was left in Athens alone (cp. Acts 17:16-34). Shortly after Timothy and Silas left him, Paul went on from Athens to Corinth, where he was rejoined by Silas and Timothy on their return from their respective Macedonian errands (Acts 18:5). Soon after their return this letter was sent.

‘When we could no longer endure it’ translates *μηκέτι στέγοντες* (*mēketi stegontes*). The Greek root *στέγω* (*stegoō*) originally meant keeping out or keeping in water or another fluid (e.g., of a watertight house or of a vessel that does not leak). It came to mean more generally ‘to contain’ and then ‘to endure’ (cp. 1 Cor. 9:12; 13:7).

The apostle uses the plural pronoun ‘we,’ but the context makes it clear that Paul referred to himself (could Silas have been involved in the decision as well?). The decision to send Timothy back to Thessalonica did not come easily. The fact that there was no news out of Thessalonica was hard for the apostle to ‘endure.’ Paul did not resort to this decision immediately, but only when he and those with him could no longer stand the anxiety of not knowing about the church.

On the other hand, the thought of being alone in Athens was not pleasant. That city was itself a demanding place for an evangelist, both a hotbed of intellectual activity and a place so steeped in

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idol-worship (Acts 17:16) that the spiritual atmosphere must have been oppressive. Although he preached the gospel there and had opportunity to talk with some of the leading thinkers in the city (Acts 17:18-31), response to the message was apparently limited.

We do not know why Paul himself did not go back. Possibly he was already too committed to his forthcoming trip to Corinth; perhaps also his presence in Thessalonica would have created problems with the city authorities, whereas Timothy may not have been as well known.

The prospect of being left alone in such a city, surrounded by images and confronted by cultured philosophers, did not appeal to him. It left him feeling abandoned and desolate. The Greek construction of the sentence emphasizes the word ‘alone.’ In fact, Paul saw this as such a daunting prospect that he used a word for ‘left’ (*μόνοι, monoi*) that means ‘abandoned’ or ‘forsaken’. It was used in secular context of leaving a loved one behind at death or to describe what happens when parents die and their children become orphans. The kind of sacrifice Paul made indicates again the strength of his pastoral concern for the Thessalonians.

2. Pastoral Help (3:2)

a) Timothy's Character (3:2a)

...and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ...

The verb for ‘sent’ is plural (*ἐπέμψαμεν, epempsamen*). A natural inference from the plural is that Paul and Silas were jointly involved in sending Timothy back to Thessalonica. In verse 5, Paul takes personal responsibility for sending him (*ἐπέμψα, epempsa*). This was fitting, since Timothy was Paul’s aide-de-camp; the initiative was presumably Paul’s and Silas agreed that Timothy should go.

The measure of Paul’s concern for the Thessalonians is reflected in the person he sent to them. He might well have found a messenger from among the crowds or a few converts at Athens to make a fact-finding visit to Thessalonica. But he did not resort to such an alternative. Instead, he sent to them Timothy. It is clear that Timothy was a person of some caliber. Paul’s description of him makes it clear that it would be doubly difficult to part with him.

Although perhaps a junior member of the missionary team, Timothy was nevertheless a genuine part of it. He was a brother, both a fellow Christian and a treasured spiritual colleague in their ministry. And he was God’s fellow worker in spreading the ‘gospel of Christ’ (*εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, euangeliō tou Christou*). Most manuscripts call Timothy ‘God’s fellow worker’ (*συνεργόν τοῦ θεοῦ, synergon tou theou*), although some manuscripts prefer ‘minister’ (*διακονος, diakonos*) to ‘fellow worker.’

In other words, he was a fully accredited and highly valued member of the team, a fitting representative of Paul and, in fact, of the Lord Jesus Christ. The purpose of Paul’s twofold description of Timothy is not to tell the Thessalonians about Timothy, because they knew him personally. Rather, it is to emphasize who it is that Paul is losing and that the Thessalonians are gaining.

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b) Timothy's Mission (3:2b)

...to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith...

Timothy's mission was not just that of a news gatherer, although this was definitely part of his brief (vv. 5-6). More significantly, he was sent to strengthen and encourage the believers in their faith. For Paul, the goal of missionary work was not simply getting people to believe the gospel. True faith, when it arose, needed to be nurtured and strengthened. It needed to be corrected when it erred and supplemented when it was weak or inadequate. Timothy was being sent to provide just that kind of ministry. He was not only to observe what was happening in the church, but he was to nurture its faith as well.

The purpose behind Timothy's visit was that he might 'establish' and 'encourage' the believers in their faith. Both of these terms are strong. 'Establish' or 'strengthen' (*στηριζαι, stērixai*) means to support or buttress something with the intent of establishing it. Strong faith is a result of knowing all that God has revealed, and has a firm foundation in sound doctrine. 'Encourage' (*παρακαλέσαι, parakalesai*) denotes coming alongside and motivating them to live sound doctrine. It carries associations of the way that the Holy Spirit comforts believers, drawing alongside them to stiffen their resolution. Timothy's task was to make the foundation of the Thessalonians' faith solid and unwavering so they could have confidence to apply the truth.

3. Predicted Suffering (3:3-4)

...that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.

a) Suffering of Paul

Commentators disagree as to whether the 'tribulations' referred to are those experienced by the Thessalonians, by Paul, or both. It is not clear whether 'we' refers primarily to Paul or to the Thessalonians. Here is an argument in favor of Paul being the object of the 'afflictions.' First, the context of 3:3 is still related to 2:17, which includes Paul's sufferings in being forcibly taken away from Thessalonica. Second, Paul's editorial use of 'we' in 3:3-4 refers to himself and his afflictions, not to the combined afflictions of the Thessalonians and his own. Therefore, Paul surmised that the Thessalonians' knowledge of his 'tribulations' at Thessalonica and afterwards might have a negative influence on their faith. They might have thought, or have been told, 'Paul is not in God's will; he is having all types of problems.' Paul sent Timothy to counteract any such ideas.

Paul refers to his 'afflictions' (*θλίψεσω, thlipēsō*) in verse 3. This leads Paul to remind the Thessalonians that he had told them beforehand that he would 'suffer tribulation' (*θλίβεσθαι, thlibesthai*). Paul was concerned that the Thessalonians might view his tribulations as evidence that he was out of God's favor. He therefore reminds them that he had been 'telling' them 'beforehand' about his forthcoming suffering. (The Greek imperfect tense of this verb, *προελέγομεν, proelegomen*, implies that he had told them this several times.) Therefore, tribulations in Paul's life are not necessarily a sign that he (or, indeed, any Christian) is out of God's favor. Paul's use of 'appointed' and 'about to' implies that God is ultimately controlling these situations of suffering.

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b) Suffering of the Thessalonians

‘Shaken’ or ‘disturbed’ (*αἰνεσθαι, sainesthai*) originally designated the wagging of a dog’s tail, but through the years it came to mean, ‘to allure, fascinate, flatter, or beguile.’ When a dog wags its tail, it often does so to draw attention to itself and gain something it wants. Hence *σαίνω (sainō)*, the root verb of *sainesthai*, later referred to a person who tried to flatter or beguile other people. Paul did not want anyone to lure the Thessalonians away from the truth in that manner, because they had been made vulnerable by persecution and suffering.

What made this nurturing ministry so critical for the Thessalonians was the persecution they were facing. The new believers had themselves felt the fires of persecution while Paul was with them (1:6), and presumably they had continued to do so since he had left. This is what made Paul’s concern for them so unbearable.

It was not that Paul had failed to warn the Thessalonians about the inevitability of suffering. Exactly the opposite was true. They knew quite well that they (as well as Paul and his helpers) were destined to suffer on account of their new faith. It was something that the missionaries had told them repeatedly.

Would Paul’s friends be ‘shaken’ by their experiences? Paul’s response is that suffering is part of the purpose of God for His children. It is an inevitable consequence of Christian discipleship. If God has ‘appointed’ (*ἔθετο etheto*) His people to obtain salvation on the Day of Judgment (5:9), He has equally appointed them to endure affliction in their present mortal life. Thus, according to the consistent testimony of the NT, they follow the example of Christ (John 15:20) and indeed suffer His sufferings in the certain hope of sharing His glory hereafter (cp. Rom. 8:17).

All believers should expect tribulations and persecutions because all have been destined for such temporal difficulties. Knowing that persecution is certain does not in itself make its pains any easier to bear. But at least it can keep us from becoming unsettled, disturbed, or surprised when it does come. Suffering for Christ is no indication that we have gone off track, as it were. Rather, it is proof that we are His true followers and fellow heirs (cp. Phil. 1:29; Rom. 8:17).

Nowadays, some believers have been influenced by a strand of teaching which encourages them to believe that God wants all His people to go through life with hardly a flicker of illness, surrounded by material comforts of every kind. Christians like that must sooner or later undergo the disillusioning experience of coming face to face with spiritual reality. Far from attempting to conceal the cost of discipleship, Paul had been completely candid about what they could expect once they took up service under the banner of Christ.

4. Pressing Concern (3:5)

For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.

Paul is not simply repeating what he said earlier in verse 1. For one thing, Paul’s emotions are in evidence when he shifts explicitly into the first person by using the singular ‘I’ here, over against the plural editorial ‘we.’ This may well be to reinforce the fact that he personally was behind the decision to send Timothy to the church. Paul also communicates his love and concern for the Thessalonians when he says he ‘could no longer endure it.’ But secondly, Paul mentions here that he had sent Timothy specifically to find out about their faith. He not only wanted Timothy

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to encourage and strengthen their faith, but also to learn how it was faring in such difficult circumstances.

Behind this lay his awareness that the tempter was active in their trials. The tempter is identical with Satan of 2:19, bent on frustrating the work of God by putting hindrances in the missionaries' path or setting traps to bring about the converts' spiritual downfall. Paul knew that their common adversary, the devil, not only tried to prevent the spread of the gospel, but made every effort to pervert and destroy the faith of those who did profess to believe.

The aorist *ἐπείρασεν*, (*epeirasen*, 'tempted') here implies successful temptation, temptation which had succeeded in overthrowing their faith. The clause expresses apprehension over what might be discovered by Timothy on his arrival. Paul did not want his labor on behalf of the Thessalonians to have been 'in vain' (*εἰς κενόν*, *eis kenon*), meaning 'empty, void, pointless, for nothing.' Paul was concerned about the Thessalonians' faith. He wanted to know that it was real rather than superficial.

How was it possible for Timothy to go back to Thessalonica, when the way was barred for Paul himself—and probably for Silas too? We can only speculate, but Timothy, as the junior partner in the missionary team, may not have been so much in the public eye as his two senior colleagues; moreover, Timothy, the son of a Greek father, perhaps looked like a Greek and therefore attracted no special attention in a Greek city, whereas Paul and Silas were full Jews and probably immediately recognizable as such—as they had been at Philippi (cp. Acts 16:20). How Paul and the others learned about the persecution which the church of Thessalonica had to endure after their departure we are not told, but it was not difficult for a message to be sent to them in Berea or Athens with the news.

B. Timothy Returns to Paul in Corinth (1 Th. 3:6-10)

In these verses, Timothy returns to Paul and Silas in Corinth with good news, and Paul is comforted.

1. Timothy's Report (3:6)

a) Good News of Faith and Love (3:6a)

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love...

Timothy had just returned from his mission to Thessalonica and been reunited with Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5). He was able to pass on to Paul an encouraging account of the state of affairs in the congregation. In fact, Paul can write of Timothy bringing 'good news' of their faith and love, a term otherwise restricted to gospel preaching. Timothy's report had fallen on Paul's ears like the good news of the gospel!

Paul somewhat shockingly uses the verb *euangelizō* to refer to Timothy's report ('good news,' *εὐαγγελισμένου*, *euangelisamenou*). Normally in the New Testament *euangelizō* is translated as 'preaching the gospel.' This is an instance of the non-technical use of this term and the only place in Paul's writings where *euangelizō* does not refer directly to preaching the gospel (for the normal use, see e.g., 1:5). This unusual use of *euangelizō* adds to the emotional impact of this verse.

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That good news concerned, firstly, the faith and love of the Thessalonians. Timothy was able to tell Paul that the believers were holding fast to the truth of the gospel. Their ‘faith’ (*πίστω, pistō*) in God and Jesus Christ was genuine. In spite of what they were suffering, they had not abandoned their new-found belief in the true and living God and in His Son Jesus Christ (1:9-10). They also had authentic ‘love’ (*ἀγάπην, agapēn*) for the Lord, which was the clearest evidence that they were Christians. The faith and love which had begun to manifest themselves immediately after their conversion, while the missionaries were still with them (cp. 1:3), were still in evidence. Their faith in God found active expression in their love for others and not least for the missionaries.

The opening phrase, ‘But now...’ (*αρτι, arti*) suggests that the apostle could hardly wait to send word back to Thessalonica to say how thrilled he was by all that he had heard. In particular, Timothy’s report had quieted his fears that all of his efforts had been for nothing. Persecution had not succeeded in quenching either their faith in Christ or their love for God and His people. This letter was evidently written as soon as possible after Timothy’s recent arrival.

b) Good News of Personal Affection (3:6b)

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

But Timothy also brought good news of a more personal nature. He told Paul that the church in Thessalonica always had pleasant memories of them. They didn’t just remember them well in the sense of not having forgotten them; rather, their memory of them was happy and friendly. They did not recall them with bitterness as visitors who brought nothing but trouble.

In addition they longed to see them again, just as the missionaries themselves were eager to see them. The language of ‘eagerly longing’ or ‘greatly desiring’ (*ἐπιποθοῦντες epipothountes*), suggests the intensity of their love. The sudden parting and long absence of Paul, Silas, and Timothy, and the slanders of the anti-gospel factions in the city, had not dampened the believers’ affection for them. Indeed, they still had a place in their hearts for Paul himself.

It was good news for the apostle that they had cherished memories of him and they were still confidently loyal to him as Christ’s true apostle. Paul rejoiced in the good news that they were eager to renew fellowship with him. These two reasons—the spiritual health of the Thessalonians, and their positive remembrance of Paul—provide the reasons, or basis for Paul’s comfort in verse 7.

2. Paul’s Response (3:7-10)

a) Comfort (3:7)

...therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith.

This was all wonderfully good news to the apostle. Timothy’s news was a profound encouragement to Paul and those with him; it ‘comforted’ (*παρεκλήθημεν, pareklēthēmen*) him. This report was the source of the apostle’s shift from anxiety to delight. It reached him when he was burdened with his own deep troubles of ‘affliction’ (*ἀνάγκη, anagkē*) and ‘distress’ (*θλίψει, thlipsei*). Missionary activity, never easy at any time, had been particularly difficult in Corinth, it seems. The distress and affliction at this time may have been more psychological than physical. It was under the choking burden of his concerns for the church of Corinth in

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particular and the churches of Christ in general that the news of the firm faith of the Thessalonians reached him and cheered him.

b) Reinvigoration (3:8)

For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.

In fact, it more than cheered him. It gave him a new lease on life. Paul's entire life was bound up in the ministry of the gospel. He lived to see men and women changed by its power and brought into a living bond of faith with the Lord. Nothing disheartened him more than to have people make a profession of faith only to fall from it when allured or opposed by the world. On the other hand, nothing inspired him more than news that his converts were holding firm their faith and making progress in the life of love.

All of this was a weight off Paul's mind. 'Now we live'! That little phrase speaks volumes. It tells us that a troubled servant of Christ felt able to relax, to breathe again, as it were. It is as if Paul were saying, 'The news of your unwavering faith and love is the very breath of life to us. We can now breathe freely.' It was a though he had been brought back to life in the midst of his 'distress and tribulation.' Perhaps he also felt that his life was not in vain, that in laying it out for the sake of the gospel he was not spending himself for no purpose.

It was their firm faith that caused Paul to be comforted. His use of this phrase to 'stand fast' also served as a gentle reminder to continue in the faith. 'Stand fast' (*στηκετε, stēkete*) was a military term meaning not to retreat in the face of an attack. News that the Thessalonian believers were remaining true to the Lord revived Paul's burdened spirit. But he was revived personally as well. The fact that the church was holding true in Thessalonica encouraged him to press on preaching the gospel.

c) Rejoicing (3:9)

For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God...

The news Timothy brought back not only invigorated Paul but also filled him with joy (*χαρά, chara*). In another emotional outburst, Paul uses a rhetorical question (cp. Ps. 116:12) to indicate that he is very joyous as a result of the good report that he has received about the Thessalonians. Can he thank God enough for the joy they have brought him? No! The verb 'to render' translates *ἀνταποδοῦναι (antapodounai, 'to give back as an equivalent')*, and expresses the impossibility of repaying the Lord for all the divine work that caused him to rejoice. His rejoicing (*chairō*) serves as the second proof that he is truly comforted (v. 7), with v. 8 being the first proof.

Since Paul lived in an atmosphere of communion with God, we may presume that his instinctive response to Timothy's report was to pray, thanking God as the author of not only the persevering faith of the Thessalonians but also of the joy he felt in his own heart.

It is worth noting that Paul's reaction to all this 'good news' was to offer thanks to God. There is even a measure of exasperation in his words: 'How can we ever thank God enough?' It would have been so easy for Paul to have taken a different line here. He could, for instance, have congratulated the Thessalonian believers on their staying power. For that matter, he could have congratulated himself: 'See what a great church I've planted!' In fact, the approach adopted in this passage was typical of Paul. It illustrates the fact that he understood the reality of the situation. God had made these believers what they were; the credit was His. Furthermore, there

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is profound pastoral sense in his approach. To be assured that a mature believer thanks God for us is mightily encouraging without pandering to our tendency to self-promotion.

d) Prayer (3:10)

...night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith?

Timothy's report stimulated an outburst of fresh energy in prayer. Paul and his companions had always been praying (*δεόμενοι, deomenoi*) for the Thessalonians (1:2), but fresh news of them added urgency to their intercession. Their prayers for the Thessalonians focused on asking God to open a way to see them again. Their joyful prayers included the request that God's providence would allow him to return to the Thessalonians.

Timothy had brought good news about them, but his report also had revealed that there were things still 'lacking in their faith.' This does not mean that the quality of the Thessalonians' faith was defective; rather, there were important areas in which they required further instruction. We should not see this as unduly negative, but simply as the normal pastoral duty to aid Christians in the perseverance in their faith. Apparently there were truths they did not understand fully, other things they did not know at all, and patterns of living among them that were not consistent with the gospel. Later sections of this letter (4:1-5:22) reveal what some of these were. In other words, there was still much to supply, mend, to straighten out, and to set in order. And while Paul knew that a letter could meet some of these needs, he also knew that there was no substitute for face-to-face contact.

Paul had more than one object in view as he prayed. The opportunity to renew fellowship was obviously one element in his thinking, but even that was subordinated to his great concern to serve them in the cause of the gospel. Not content with the possibility of seeing their faces, he wanted to build them up in their faith by providing teaching that would remedy any deficiencies that were present.

As modern Christians reading Timothy's report in 1 Thessalonians, I trust that we also experience some degree of joy upon hearing of Christ's work in the Thessalonians long ago. Those believing Thessalonians are still part of Christ's church, as they are now with Christ in heaven, and they and we will eventually all be together forever in the new heavens and earth.

Did Paul visit Thessalonica again? Yes, it is highly likely that he did, because many passages in the New Testament speak of him returning to Macedonia (the region that included Thessalonica). For example, see Acts 19:21-22; 20:1-5; 1 Cor. 16:5; 2 Cor. 1:16; 8:3-5; 1 Tim. 1:3.

For next time: Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12.