

“Encourage!”

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

October 31, 2021

Today is the midway point through our series in 1Thessalonians which we have entitled, *Holy Expectation: Living in Holiness, Hope, and Love Until Jesus Comes*.

Let me briefly remind us of the context of 1 Thessalonians. After Paul was released from prison in Philippi for preaching the gospel, he went to the synagogue in Thessalonica and for 3 Sabbaths “reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead” and declaring that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 17:1-3). Some Jews believed along with a large number of God-fearing Greeks and so the church of Thessalonica was born. But immediately a severe persecution rose up against the church by jealous Jews who incited mobs of wicked men forcing Paul to leave Thessalonica by night.

As we come to chapter 3, Paul is reflecting on his concern for the Thessalonians upon his departure. Knowing that they were being severely persecuted, he wondered if these new believers would indeed withstand the onslaught of Satan’s temptation—our would they fall away from the gospel in which they had believed?

There are two things we must not overlook in chapter 3. The first is *the essential need for persevering faith*. In Mark 13:13, Jesus said, “The one who endures to the end will be saved.” As I mentioned in chapter 1, a summary of the NT’s teaching on perseverance is that *those who persevere to the end will be saved, and they persevere to end by the sustaining power of God’s grace (1Cor 1:4-9)*. So, *saving faith is persevering faith, and persevering faith is sustained by grace*. What’s important for today’s purposes is to see that ***the genuineness of today’s faith is authenticated by tomorrow’s perseverance. True faith perseveres.***

The second thing we cannot overlook is the power of encouragement from other believers as we persevere. The need for persevering faith and encouragement to persevere is the driving force behind chapter three. We might summarize today’s message this way: ***Because persevering faith in Christ is essential to our eternal destiny, we must encourage one another to withstand Satan’s temptations that accompany our afflictions so that God’s purifying purposes through our afflictions will produce holy lives of persevering faith and abounding love.***

At first, this chapter can feel a bit like reading someone else’s mail because it is so personal in nature. And yet it is remarkably relevant to our lives because it contains principles that are basic to the Christian life. So let me point out *5 truths that we must take hold of on the road of persevering faith*:

1. **Encouragement is powerful** (1Thess 3:1-2).

[vs. 1-2] This opening phrase, “when we could endure it no longer” is repeated again in vs. 5: “when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith.” The urgency of this phrase points us to what really mattered to Paul—that his newborn brothers and sisters in the faith would persevere and not stumble back into unbelief. And so Paul sends Timothy to encourage them.

To grasp the significance of this ministry of encouragement, we need to keep in mind how incredibly hard and dangerous ministry was in the Macedonian region. Paul and his associates had been beaten, jailed, and defamed in Philippi, persecuted, and expelled from Thessalonica and later from Berea. They would go on to be rejected and scorned in Athens and we recently saw how Paul faced adversity of every kind in Corinth including severely dangerous travel and shipwrecks, along with persecution from Jews and Gentiles alike. So Silas and Timothy were not there just to keep Paul company. When

ministry and travel is that dangerous and hard, you've got to stick together as a team. Not only was it risky for Timothy to return to Thessalonica by himself, it was also costly to Paul and Silas to let him go. Yet this highlights the essential need for persevering faith and the power of encouragement for those on the road of perseverance.

So, Paul sent Timothy "to strengthen and encourage" them in their faith (2). Notice that *Timothy* is to strengthen and encourage them yet later in vs. 9 Paul thanks *God* for having sustained the Thessalonians and goes on in vs. 13 to pray that *God* will establish their hearts. So, who is doing the strengthening? Timothy or God? The answer to this question is what makes encouragement so powerful. Certainly, God is the one who strengthens our hearts through the encouragement of His people. There are two implications here. First, God makes our encouragement to others effective. The mere words of man don't give strength, but God's grace working through us does strengthen others. Second, God most often strengthens our hearts through other believers.

Here's why this matters. Every believer in this room can have a ministry of encouragement. And I strongly urge you to conscientiously purpose in your heart to be a minister of encouragement. To determine that your speech will be positive rather than negative and that you will get up each day praying for and looking for opportunities to encourage others as much as you can—and you can begin at home by putting the wind of encouragement in your spouse's sail or by encouraging your kids, etc. The reality is that everyone of us is surrounded by people every day who are walking through the pain of trials (big or small) and every affliction that they face is intimately relevant to their need for God and their need for persevering faith. *We are strategically placed in their lives so that God can strengthen their hearts through our encouragement.*

Don't overlook the power of seemingly small doses of encouragement—a few words, a "job well done," a note of encouragement, even a quick prayer. You can have a ministry of encouragement! So what will your ministry of encouragement look like? Devoting your Instagram account to encouragement from the Scriptures? Using other social media platforms to personally encourage friends? Or just praying and making a conscious effort every day to fill your speech with encouragement and being on the lookout for those God brings into your day who need to be strengthened through you?

## 2. **Persecution and suffering are normal** (1 Thess 3:3-4).

**[vs. 2-4]** It should go without saying that affliction is normal and to be expected in life. Yet, when affliction strikes, we react to it as an intruder. This is so natural to our human nature that Paul's basic instruction from the very beginning for new believers was to not only expect affliction in general but persecution in particular on the road of the cross. For example, Acts 14:22 explains that Paul's custom was to strengthen the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, saying "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Similarly in vs 4, Paul kept telling them in advance to expect such trials so that they would not be disturbed (meaning, shaken in their faith) by these afflictions. Paul's not just concerned about their emotional well-being, but the very real possibility of apostasy—turning away from the gospel because the road is hard.

The very purpose of Timothy's encouragement was to counteract any possible disillusionment or deception that the enemy might pose in the midst of suffering. The purpose of Timothy's encouragement was to keep their hearts anchored in the gospel of grace.

This is important because affliction in general and persecution in particular tend to disturb our walk of faith if we are not vigilant. Afflictions can lead to disillusionment and doubt. Pain can turn us inward and make us resentful toward God if our eyes are not intentionally turned to God and His goodness (this is where we so often need the encouragement of another believer). Persecution is painful and our hearts are naturally inclined to fear and self-preservation. Pride dies slowly and always resents and resists vulnerability to pain, danger, or death. This is how affliction disturbs or erodes our faith. And this is why we must all embrace a ministry of encouragement for each other on the road of persevering faith.

### 3. **Temptation is inevitable but not irresistible** (1Thess 3:5).

**[vs. 5]** When the dark clouds of affliction come and everything around you feels dark, Satan lies in wait in the shadows of our suffering. He preys on us with temptation. So when affliction strikes, we must immediately become alert to temptation—always! What you must see is that affliction is never just about circumstances. It is a spiritual battle for your soul. And the battle will either strengthen or erode your faith. And the determining factor between the two, is what you believe in the storm. This is why we cannot afford to regard a ministry of encouragement as optional. We must rather regard encouragement as a powerful tool in God's hand because truth conquers disillusionment, and temptation can be resisted. We know this because the Thessalonians withstood the storm of persecution.

### 4. **Faith and love are essential characteristics of the redeemed** (1Thess 3:6).

**[vs. 6-10]** The Thessalonians had been through the fire (and were still in it). Yet the fact that their faith was persevering and their love strong indicated that the grace of God was truly at work in them. True Christians are known for proven faith and enduring love. How do you

know if someone is a true Christian? Watch them suffer. The question is not if they will struggle with their suffering—they will. The question is, who will they be on the other side? Will they demonstrate proven faith and genuine love or will they push God away and grow bitter toward others?

If we say we believe but don't walk by faith, actively trusting God in daily life, our profession of faith is suspicious. Or as 1 John 4:20 says, "If someone says, "I **love** God," and hates his **brother**, he is a liar..."

Faith and love are the essential marks of true believers. So, when Paul hears that the Thessalonians are bearing these qualities in the midst of persecution, he is overjoyed with gratitude.

Furthermore, vs. 6 says the Thessalonians always think kindly of Paul and his associates and long to see them again. Why is this significant? Because those who were persecuting the church were seeking to discredit Paul. Yet the report of affection for Paul by the church indicated that the door was wide open for ongoing discipleship and encouragement for the Thessalonian believers. In fact, this ongoing discipleship was the driving motivation behind Paul's persistent prayers in vs. 10—so he could complete what was lacking in their faith. Notice here how Paul not only seeks to encourage those whom he is discipling but also is encouraged by the progress of these young disciples.

### 5. **Holiness is the goal** (1Thess 3:11-13).

Paul concludes now with a prayer. **[vs. 11-13]** Paul essentially makes 3 requests in this prayer. First, He prays that God will make it possible for Paul to return to the Thessalonians (11). The reason is found in vs. 10: so we can "complete what is lacking in your faith." In other words, this request is for the opportunity to further disciple them in person, giving them further instruction in the faith that was cut short by persecution. Paul had already expressed his desire to visit in 2:18 but

was hindered by Satan. And so, Paul prays that God will overcome Satan's opposition so that he can return to further teach, disciple, and encourage these new believers.

Paul's second request in vs. 12 is that the Lord will cause them to increase and abound in love for one another and for all people. The idea here is that their love for fellow believers and unbelievers would increase to the point of overflowing. In other words, that their lives would be marked by "over the top" love unlike anything else their society has seen. Jesus said, "by this all men will know you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Paul is praying that the love of Christ will be abundantly manifested in their lives.

What a great way for us to pray for ourselves and one another: "Lord, increase our capacity to love all people, especially fellow believers, with Your love!"

Paul's final request is that their love will blossom into holiness (Note "so that" in vs. 13). **[vs. 13]** Paul has the final day of judgment in mind here, praying that their lives will be pure and blameless when Jesus returns, and they stand in the presence of their heavenly Father. It's important to note that while Paul prays for God to establish this holiness in their lives, he goes on in chapter 4 to call them to embrace God's will which is their sanctification in abstaining from sexual sin (4:3). So, Paul urges the Thessalonians to embrace the personal responsibility of obedience while at the same time praying for God to do the supernatural work of sanctification—producing true holiness in their lives. This reminds me of Heb 12:14 where we are exhorted to pursue the sanctification without which, no one will see the Lord. Notice the end goal is holiness—being like Christ by being in Christ and living like Christ.

So how is it that love blossoms into holiness? When we truly love, we do not sin. In Romans 13:8-10 Paul says, "love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law"—holiness. Love does not commit adultery, or murder, or steal, or covet. Walking in love is walking away from sin. Walking in love is walking in holiness.

One commentator put it this way: "*Unless love grows, selfish desires increase and will turn our love toward ourselves and not toward God, which results in an ungodly character and lifestyle.*"<sup>1</sup> So we could say that love is the work of sanctification (in part), and relationships are the road upon which we are most often sanctified.

And in fact, it is because of our selfish desires that God graciously walks us through affliction. Because affliction and troubled relationships reveal our hearts and our need for holiness. Does affliction tend to make you irritable or angry? That irritation and anger reveals our love for self-interest. It reveals how earthly and temporal our affections are. It shows us how much we resent humility because a humble, servant-hearted mentality is not impatient or angry when put under distress that requires selflessness. And so God does not remove affliction from our earthly Christian life because His primary goal is not ease or comfort, but holiness that flings the door open to pure, eternal joy.

The end goal of our lives is holiness—to be in like Christ, by being in Christ, living like Christ in our love for one another with persevering faith. To that end, let's encourage one another as the day draws near.

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<sup>1</sup> G.K. Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians (The IVP NT Commentary Series), pg. 110.

## Taking God's Word to God's Throne

### A Prayer from 1Thessalonians 3

Father, we confess that we are prone to discouragement and defeat by our afflictions, and that in the shadows of our suffering Satan prowls about, preying on us with temptation. Yet we rise up to declare that You are good, so good that You use even our afflictions as instruments in Your hand to purify us and make us holy like Jesus. We see our need for encouragement—encouragement from those who also need to be encouraged. So grant each one of us a ministry of encouragement through which You empower persevering faith and abounding love for each other and all people so that our hearts will be blameless and holy when Jesus comes.