

Separation Anxiety 1 Thessalonians 3

About 10 p.m., Dad answered the phone and heard: “Dad, can we stay out late tonight?” Dad answered, “Since you were responsible enough to call, okay, but be in by 2 A.M.” When he hung up, his wife asked who was on the phone. “One of the boys,” he replied. “I gave them permission to stay out late. So long as they call, I can be flexible” “That wasn’t our boys,” she said. “They’re both downstairs in the basement.”

One of the most basic of fatherly instincts is to know that our children are safe. As the founder of the Thessalonian church, Paul had a fatherly interest in the believers there. He was worried about their well-being. Persecution had driven him from their city. They remained to face the residual wrath. Twice, he had tried to check on them only to be somehow turned back by Satan. The next best thing he could do was to arrange to send one of his most trusted companions in his place.

I. A Sacrificial Project (1-5)

¹So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. ²We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ³so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. ⁴In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. ⁵For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.

A. To Know How the Thessalonians Were Faring Warranted Some Sacrifices

This much Paul did know. He and Silas had been driven out of Thessalonica by persecutors, and a very green, novice community of believers had been left behind with those same persecutors. Not knowing if their faith had survived, if there even still was a church, was more than Paul could endure. So, Paul was forced to face the cost required for checking up on them.

The missionaries were driven from Thessalonica to Berea, where the persecutors followed them. Silas and Timothy were evidently not as “at risk” as Paul, for they stayed in Berea while Paul was escorted to Athens. He left instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him. Acts does not record that they did, but apparently they must have, for it was from Athens that Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica and Silas to other towns in Macedonia. Paul remained by himself until Timothy and Silas met up with him again in Corinth. That reunion prompted this letter.

If one was a student of history, philosophy, culture, art or education, then, visiting Athens was a golden opportunity, but Paul didn’t like the place. “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). He made a few disciples, but this was not a place he would have ever chosen to remain for any length of time without the moral and spiritual support of his companions. But, these were extraordinary circumstances. Not knowing the fate of his beloved Thessalonians was a huge distraction and a source of great grief. So, going it alone in Athens for a time was something that just had to be.

To part with Timothy in times like these was also no small thing. He calls his young companion, “our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ.” He wanted the Thessalonians to know that Timothy was a capable servant and proxy for himself. But, those words do not tell the whole story.

Timothy was the son of a Jewish woman and a Greek father. Schooled by his grandmother and mother in the Old Testament, he was won to Christ by Paul and immediately began working with him. Over time, he became like Paul's own son. In fact, in the letters that bear Timothy's name, Paul calls the young man "my true son in the faith" (1 Timothy 1:2) and simply, "my dear son" (2 Timothy 1:2). Timothy was sent on a number of special assignments, but in dark times like these, it would have been understandable had Paul wanted to keep Timothy nearby.

B. Timothy's Mission Was Two-Fold

Timothy's assignment was "to strengthen and encourage" the Thessalonians in their faith. Paul had not been in Thessalonica for long and he had not left on his own terms. How solid in the faith could they be? If a remnant of the church did remain, Timothy was to remind them that the only way they could survive the persecution raging around them was to depend on God.

Timothy's mission was not to break any new ground, but simply to reinforce the promises of God including the assurance of eternal salvation that elevates a Christian's perspective even in hardship as well as the certainty of Christ's presence right now that provides peace in every storm. Timothy would find that the Holy Spirit had already reminded the church of some of these lessons: He would report back to Paul of their: "work produced by faith" ... "labor prompted by love" and ... "endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (chapter 1:3).

Timothy's other task was to remind these people that trials of one kind or another must always be expected. Christians are marked for trials. The Gospel is a threat to the sinister forces that keep mankind enslaved to sin and fear. It is to be expected that Satan and his minions will work overtime to undermine faith. The phrase "unsettled by these trials" connotes the idea of being lured away by deception. The one that Jesus once called "a liar and the Father of lies" (John 8:44) had no qualms about bending truth so as to cause people to abandon their faith.

C. Some Degree of Harassment by the Tempter is a Certainty for Us

The purpose of the testing of our faith, whether persecution or something more subtle, is to raise questions, breed doubts and cultivate fears, eventually, culminating in the abandonment of faith. An abandonment of faith can mean a verbal denial of Jesus to avoid death. But, the silence of believers so as to avoid some lesser grief can also, arguably, be called an abandonment of faith in that verbal testimony is halted. And, arguably, any degree of re-surrender to earthly values and sin could be called an abandonment of faith in that the witness of transformed lives is destroyed.

Why are American Christians not persecuted in ways comparable to what believers face in China, Africa, the Middle East or elsewhere around the world? Some simply attribute this to the fact that we are blessed to live where we live. Others even acknowledge that we could be a bit too apathetic, materialistic or comfortable to be much of a threat to Satan. Might it make a difference were we to start thinking of ourselves as dupes of a kind of satanic pestering custom-tailored just for us? Have we abandoned enough of our faith to be rendered ineffective because we have failed to recognize the sinister, hellish significant agenda aimed directly against us? Might we put up a better fight if we were to realize that we are not just a bit too passive in our faith? We might, in fact, be under attack..

Is it insignificant that in a land birthed in liberty, we are accused of being repressed by our faith? Is it nothing that in a culture that values religious tolerance, we are accused of being intolerant when we believe the Bible? Is it irrelevant that in a nation that is a world-leader in science and education, that we are accused of being superstitious, backwards rubes for clinging to ancient truths? Is it inconsequential that in a land that prizes achievement, we are accused of being unambitious failures when we are simply content? If we resent those accusations enough, we may adjust our values just enough to avoid feeling restrained, intolerant, stupid or unambitious.

Do you see how devilishly clever such attacks are? We don't lose our lives or property - just our witness and power, and Satan is perfectly happy with that. Do not hear me wrong. It is not the blessings of being Americans that do us in. They are just that, blessings. It is the satanic distortions of what those blessings ought to mean to us that cause us to become just a little more sinful, a little less stubborn about the Gospel, a little less prone to cling to the ancient truths of the Bible and a little more materialistic. If we can begin to recognize that this is serious business, Satan's unique attack on American believers, maybe, we will see the need to resist him better.

II. A Satisfying Presentation (6-10)

A. The News from Thessalonica Was Very Good verse 6

⁶But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.

Timothy completed his project in Thessalonica and returned to Paul to report his findings. The presentation that Timothy brought back was the opposite of what the Apostle had feared. Not only was the church intact, it had remained intact due to the "faith and love" of the people.

Jesus said that faith as small as a mustard seed has great power, and the survival of the church in Thessalonica proved this. Still, they were novices in the faith. It was no time to rest on the laurels of a single victory. There needed further grounding. They had come to some odd ideas about the Second Coming of Jesus. They had not renounced all the sin in their midst.

Timothy also reported that "love" in Thessalonica was still vibrant. Of course, had love not been present, the church would likely not have survived. People are not at their best when under duress. Without love, persecution would spell cutting deals to save one's own neck, short-fuses and selfishness. Faith is invaluable, but love gives faith its distinctive Christian flavor. There would have to have been more than simply a body of truths to keep the Thessalonians not only professing Christ, but still professing Christ in community with others who also professed Christ.

Love and faith were the points of Timothy's presentation that Paul, the Apostle, *NEEDED* to hear, but the gravy was the news that Paul, the friend, *LONGED* to hear. His affection for them was mutual. They longed to see him again. Remember, tones within the letter suggest that the Thessalonians had doubted Paul's love for them. There may have been rumors circulated by the persecutors, that Paul was just another religious charlatan, there for a while to guilt, fleece and otherwise exploit his audience right up until the authorities put the heat on him. Then, saving his skin was all that mattered. Timothy's report assured Paul that they had not believed such rumors and that they had never doubted his affection for them.

B. The Effect of this Good News on Paul Was Equally Good verses 7-10

This was not one of those Good News/Bad News things for Paul like the preacher who was told: "Good news, Preacher: Mrs. Parmer is wild about your sermons. Of course, the bad news is she is also wild about "The Gong Show" and "Texas Chain Saw Massacre.""

No, for Paul, the report was all good news.

1) Timothy's report left Paul encouraged. verse 7

... ⁷Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.

Paul was writing from Corinth, and things there were pretty much “par for the course”. The Jews there were harassing him. The Gentile authorities were watching him. His life had been threatened. He had been dragged to court ... just another day in Paul's world. The report of the Thessalonians' faith and love gave him courage. It is hard to imagine that he really meant that. He was the great Apostle. They were novice believers with a few novice believer issues, but that's the nature of God's scheme of things. No one outgrows the need to be encouraged by the example of others, and the faith of even the greenest Christian can spur the faith of others forward.

2) Timothy's report left Paul reinvigorated. verse 8

... ⁸For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.

This is a very transparent admission on Paul's part: “I felt I was crippled, at the end of my rope.” Between his concerns for how others were doing and the headaches that he was enduring in Corinth, he felt used up. But, “now we really live.” The report of the faith and love of the Thessalonians had given Paul a second wind, new life to move forward in his own duties.

3) Timothy's report left Paul overjoyed. verse 9

... ⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?

Joy is the only appropriate reaction of any Christian to the spiritual progress of others. Jesus said that the angels rejoice when a sinner repents. He told a parable of a shepherd that rejoiced over finding one lost sheep. And, there is an especially acute sense of joy whenever someone in whom we have invested ourselves is making progress in the faith. The Apostle John wrote a letter to “a chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the truth.” This could have been a metaphor for a church he planted. He could have had in mind an actual family. In either event, he writes:

“It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us.” - 2 John 4

4) Timothy's report left Paul hopeful. verse 10

... ¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

As sufficient as the “seed of faith” of the Thessalonians had proven to be, Paul was still adamant about wanting to return to them. He commended them for enduring this first wave of persecution, and they deserved the kudos. They did not fall to pieces under testing, but there were still gaps in their faith. They needed knowledge. They needed instruction in purity. They needed firmer grounding in truth, for new doubts and temptations would inevitably arise.

III. A Surrendered Prayer (11-13)

A salesman was late for an important appointment and couldn't find a parking space. As he frantically circled the block, he got so desperate he decided to pray. Looking to heaven, he said, "Lord, if you find me a parking space, I'll go to church every Sunday and give up drinking." Miraculously, a space appeared. The guy looked up again and said, "Never mind, Lord, I found one."

We easily forget that we are utterly dependent on God's grace and power to live as He calls us to live? And, this does not pertain only to the most challenging dimensions of life, but also to the most seemingly mundane. We need to learn to live in surrender to the will of God.

A. Only as God Wills, Do the Simplest Plans of Believers Come to Pass verse 11

¹¹Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.

It was just a trip from Athens to Thessalonica. It was a journey of significant miles, two to three weeks, but compared to other trips Paul had made, it was logistically simple. Still, Paul had tried at least twice to make the trip only to be kept from doing so by Satan. If Satan was creating the barrier, Paul knew that it would require more than just his good intentions to remove it.

B. Only as Christ Teaches Us, Do Believers Grow in Love verse 12

...¹²May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

The believers in Thessalonica did not lack love. Timothy's report confirmed to Paul that their love was strong. Love had sustained them as a fellowship to this point, but no man is perfect in love. And, even if their love for their fellow-Thessalonians was strong, that did not achieve a Christian measure of love. Paul echoed Jesus, teaching that love must extend beyond easy parameters to "everyone else." We do not learn this on our own. We learn it at the feet of Christ.

C. Only as Christ Strengthens Us, Do Believers Advance toward Holiness verse 13

...¹³May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

This is the ultimate destination of the Christian faith, for which fellowship exists and for which trials are allowed; the presentation of believers in true holiness before God when Christ returns. Holiness is not something that comes to pass when our heads are filled with all the proper facts although proper facts are useful. It is not something guaranteed to be present just because we do good deeds although good deeds are essential. Holiness is the work of God upon our hearts.

With all Paul's longing to see the Thessalonians and their longing to see him, with all the commendation to which they were entitled for enduring persecution, Paul closes with a prayer that reminds us all that ultimately, Jesus is the Victor Who accomplishes in us every good thing that is accomplished in us. He is the dynamic that empowers every step we take toward God.