

1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5 "God's Word Establishes And Encourages Us In Our Faith"

As we begin chapter three of 1st Thessalonians you'll notice that it begins with the words "so when" in the NIV, "therefore" in the NAS and "wherefore" in the KJV.

The Greek word *dio* is used here and could also mean "consequently" which necessarily means that what is about to follow is connected to what has already been said. As one bible teacher has said, 'If you see the word therefore, find out what it's there for.'

In this case Paul has been telling his Christian brothers and sisters in Thessalonica that he has been forced to leave them for a "short while -- in person, not in spirit." In his eagerness to get back to them he tried several times to go to Thessalonica and yet because of the activity of Satan he was thwarted.

But, despite this set back he rejoiced in the God who brought them from the darkness of sin to the light of His Son Jesus Christ where they found forgiveness of the penalty of their sin by faith in the Savior.

It must have been a very frustrating thing for Paul to be helpless, so as not to be able to do anything to personally see these people, who could have used some sort of encouragement from Paul.

Keep in mind that in all likelihood Paul's enemies in Thessalonica were probably delighting in the fact that they drove this mad, radically religious Jew out of town and were now flaunting their perceived victory by way of discouraging Christ's new followers by saying things like, 'is this the way your Christian champions lead you, by running out on you?'

And I'm sure Paul was aware of these kind of attacks which were full of lies. But, because of the frustration and the need to encourage the Thessalonian Christians Paul does the next best thing.

1TH 3:1-2 "Therefore, when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2 We 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,..."

Paul figured, if I can't personally go to these brothers and sisters in need, the next best thing would be to send Timothy. By this time Silas and Timothy have joined Paul in Athens shortly after Paul was forced out, and they all agree that Timothy should be the one to go back.

Now, the question has been raised, why Timothy? A couple things should come to mind. 1) Paul was perceived as the ring leader who was also one who probably stood out in a predominantly Gentile city, as a Jew. 2) Silas, having come from the Jerusalem church was also a Jew.

But, Timothy, who was from Lystra, which would be in present day Turkey, had a mother who was Jewish but a father who was Gentile. And so he may not have had the Jewish characteristics which would have made him stand out among other Gentiles.

Plus the fact that he may not have been seen as any threat, even if he were remembered by some of Paul's enemies in Thessalonica, since Timothy was probably not at the lead when it came to "stirring up the crowds."

It would turn out that it was not only a wise move by Paul but a move prompted by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. You see, Timothy was chosen by God to serve in a very special way. In fact, as we learn from Paul himself, in a letter written to Timothy, that Timothy would ultimately be called by the Holy Spirit to serve at a later date as a pastor.

And so with the types of gifts which any pastor should have, which include teaching, possibly prophecy, and any number of other gifts which would ultimately help in equipping the saints, Timothy was a man of God who would be quite capable of encouraging the saints in Thessalonica.

And look at what Paul calls him; "our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ,"

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to know that despite Timothy's youth, he was a man chosen of God who was to be respected and listened to. And not only that but he was trusted by Paul whom the Thessalonians trusted as well.

As God would have it he was the right man for the job. And what was that job? "...to strengthen and encourage you in your faith,..."

Let's take a look at that. Two words are used here that we should notice. Strengthen and encourage. Or as the KJV puts it, "to establish you and comfort you concerning your faith." Now, a literal translation might be rendered "to set fast" and "call near".

When you think of cement setting up, you think of a liquid material turning hard and then becoming so strong that you can use it as a foundation for large buildings. And so, we can be set fast or strengthened so that when the attacks come we will stand firm.

Calling near is to come along side someone to encourage them. Donald Grey Barnhouse says, "To comfort means more than to give a pat on the hand or to say some soothing words. In Latin, the prefix *com* means "with", and *fortis* or *forte* has the idea of strength. Thus, comfort means to strengthen alongside of. When God comforts He furnishes strength alongside us.....

..... When Timothy was sent to comfort the Thessalonians, he was not expected to say, "Oh, you poor, dear, Thessalonians! You've been through so much! Oh how rough; you've had it!" No, he would undergird them with the strength of God. He would put a ramrod down their backs to enable them to stand straight and erect, come what may. He would shore up their sagging spirits with the assurance that God was at their side."

You see these people were probably shaken over the fact that Paul, an apostle and teacher and evangelist could be thwarted by the enemy. In light of this what chance would they have against the enemy?

Timothy comes to their aid to explain some things as to how even persecution and trials are used by God to strengthen them and show them that He is able and willing to undergird them in their weaknesses.

What I find interesting is that while Paul is kept from coming to the Thessalonians because of Satan's activity, we see that the enemy attacks the weaker brethren by raising doubts in their minds. You see the reason Timothy is trying to strengthen and encourage them is because their faith has been weakened.

This is why Paul says, "We 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."

Have you ever wondered why you may backslide in your walk with the Lord, or why certain things in life seem to be just too

much for you, or why doubts arise as to your salvation? It all has to do with faith. Everything that is related to our relationship with God has to do with faith in Him.

And so, is it any wonder that the enemy is always trying to destroy your faith in God and His promises regarding your salvation? And should it be any surprise that Paul would say in Eph. 6:16 "In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one."

Our faith given to us by God is a shield which protects us. Paul understood that the shield given to the Thessalonians may have become weak and needed girding up, which is why Timothy was sent, so that the enemy's fiery darts would not harm them.

What harm can those attacks be, as the metaphor of fiery darts are used? Most of you could tell me. When your faith is weakened by circumstances which cloud your eyes to the God who can control all circumstances, what happens to your ability to rely on God by faith alone?

Have you ever had a trial which seemed to really take you by surprise and in which you were tempted to solve it all on your own, even when you knew it was beyond your control?

I remember a time in Ft. Lauderdale, after I had lost my job, when we didn't have enough money for food, and I got a little nervous and began trying to figure out how I was going to get some money.

I remember that whole day was a very anxious one for me and Cheryle even when we both knew that God says, "be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Phil. 4:6)

This by the way we did that morning. We came to God and prayed that He would meet our needs. I came home in the afternoon and there was Cheryle with a big smile on her face and she said that God answered our prayer. I said, 'what do you mean'?

She said, she got a check in the mail for enough money to buy groceries for a few days. It turns out that somehow we over paid the insurance company the previous month and they were returning the extra.

Was it a lack of faith on my part by trying to find a way to get extra money? Of course not. We are to provide for our families,

but to doubt that God can solve the problem in whatever way He wants, by ignoring Him, or not going to Him, is a lack of faith.

Something as simple as having a lack of faith in God can cause all sorts of anxiety which we experienced in part that day until God showed us that He knew all along what we needed and that He had every intention of taking care of us.

Our faith in God can become weak for a variety of reasons. Something bad happens and we forget how big our God is. Or things are going good and we forget how dependent we must continue to be on God. And so instead of taking time to pray or to come together with God's people to worship Him we sort of let things slide.

And before you know it the enemy comes in with his fiery dart to specifically attack your faith. And guess what happens? You go into a panic or you forget that God is the one who called you into His Kingdom; He's not going to let go of you now, but you act as though He will.

Other times your faith becomes so weak that you find it's easier not to have faith, because that would mean that we would have to submit to the God who gave us that faith. And that's where obedience to God begins to falter and you slip back into the ways of the world which can then become "comfortable".

But if you're one of God's children He may begin to make you so uncomfortable that you will be forced to look up to Him again by faith and cry out to Him for help, which is all He wanted you to do in the first place, by faith.

The Lord tells us in ROM 10:17 "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

It's true that the message we first heard and believed concerning Jesus Christ and our sin problem, which He solved by His death on the cross for the penalty of our sin, was something we received by faith as we heard the word of God explained.

But, even as believers, our faith still comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of God. Paul knew that the Thessalonians needed to hear God's message of hope and comfort so that they would be encouraged and strengthened in their faith.

Timothy would take that message to them. He not only reminded them of their salvation in Christ, but he also reminded them of other teachings they were having problems with, including Christ's second return to earth which he touches on in the fourth chapter of this letter to the Thessalonians.

They were taught many things, but it was all designed to strengthen their faith which was essential for their growth in the Lord. For we're told in HEB 11:6 "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

The writer of Hebrews in the context here speaks of the salvation we have in Christ and which John the Baptist spoke of in JOH 3:36 "Whoever believes (or who places his faith) in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

But, faith is something which is on-going, which God encourages and enables us to place in Him for all of life. It's not always easy, but then again life is not always easy. This is why we walk by faith and not by sight. Because what we see will often tempt us not to choose God and humbly rely on Him for all things.

Yeah, it can be a struggle. That's why Paul uses the language he does in 1TI 6:12 "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses."

But when you understand and appreciate the salvation you've been given in Christ through faith, then walking by faith in God each day is something you learn as you love Him and obey Him and submit to Him.

The apostle Peter puts our faith into perspective in 1PE 1:3-7 "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes

even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

Paul was trying to show the Thessalonians that by faith in God, they would learn that our Lord was in full control, they didn't need to worry about Paul and his persecutions.

This is what he meant in the 3rd verse of 1 Thes. 3; "so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them."

Paul didn't want them to worry about him, even though he was concerned for their spiritual well-being because of their own persecution.

It's hard to see someone you love suffer. And the Thessalonian Christians loved Paul and they knew he was going through some tough times because of the jealous unbelieving Jews.

Paul says, I don't want you to be "disturbed or (deceived) by these afflictions", which is the way the NAS translates it. And then they were reminded that they had already been told by Paul that this would happen. He said, "we have been destined for this."

The next verse also confirms this.

1TH 3:4 "In 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."

Paul explained to the Thessalonians that because of his faith in Christ, he would come under the attack of the enemy who would prompt such people as the jealous Jews or pagan Gentiles to come against him and the work of his ministry.

And by inference he was explaining that similar attacks would happen to them as they remained faithful to Christ and sought to love and serve Him; something he reminded Timothy of in his second letter to him.

2TI 3:12-14 "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 13 while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. 14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it,"

Here Paul tells Timothy not to be surprised over persecution or trials in this life if he wants to live a godly life to Christ's honor and glory.

In fact, he goes on in verse 14, that he should continue in what he learned and had become convinced of, which means that he must continue to live by faith in those things taught to him from God's word.

Ultimately, all trials and tribulations are designed to strengthen us in the faith, if we'll submit to God, but we shouldn't dwell on the negative because the positive is what Paul went on to tell Timothy in 2TI 2:11-12 "Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him."

And so Paul continues in our text in verse 5; "For 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."

Paul recognized how influential Satan is and how through his temptations and deceptions God's people might be side-tracked from following God by faith. And the reason Satan does that is to try and discredit both you and God's work in you by tempting you to become useless in the Kingdom of God.

You have been called by Christ to be useful as we reach out to people in His love with His message of hope. But, just as Paul was concerned that they would falter in their faith, any Pastor should have that same concern when he sees the sheep being side-tracked as they go off on their own.

Because, like Paul, I know how damaging that can be for you personally, but I also know how we can dishonor the God who called us to Himself if we get side-tracked on to a path of our own choosing.

And believe me the world watches to see if what you say with your mouth matches up with what you do in your everyday life.

As we celebrate the birth of Christ into this world we should be cognizant that the reason He came as a babe was that He would grow to a man to be publicly displayed, publicly humiliated and publicly put to death for the penalty of our sin.

He would then rise from the dead and publicly show Himself to many people as the victorious risen Savior who tells us to go out into this world and publicly declare His salvation in word and in deed.

It is for sin that Christ came into this world. The last stanza of O little town of Bethlehem puts it well. "O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel."

To live by faith is to trust this Savior born into the world for the forgiveness of our sin, but it is to live by faith everyday so that we may be faithful to serve and love Him; our great God who loves us so much that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.