

1 THESSALONIANS 3:6-10 "Paul Is Encouraged By the Steadfastness Of Their Faith"

As we saw last week Paul uses the first few verses of this third chapter to explain why he sent Timothy back to the Thessalonians.

1TH 3:2-5 "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, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. 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. 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."

Verse 5 sums up Paul's concern, but as we see in verse 6 those fears were unfounded to the relief of Paul.

1TH 3:6 "But 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."

Up until the point of Timothy's return to Paul in Corinth, Paul was hoping and praying that the Thessalonians would remain faithful to the Lord as they walked by faith and not by sight, enabling them to grow in the grace and strength of the God who gave them life eternal in Christ by faith.

And sure enough these Christians in Thessalonica, despite real persecution, were remaining faithful to the Lord, because God was with them. It's a very natural human feeling to think that if only I could be there for them, everything would be alright. We think that way with our children for example.

Distance might separate us from them. Maybe they're in college and we find out with a phone call that they were in a slight automobile accident and had to go to the emergency room to have a broken arm set.

Immediately, at least for the mom, the thought goes through one's mind, I'll fly up there and be with my baby, and make everything alright. Closeness to your loved one is a very comforting and encouraging part of helping the healing process.

And yet there are times when we discover that despite our importance in their lives, often they can get along without us. That doesn't mean that's the ideal solution, it simply means that it isn't necessarily the end of the world. And more often than not, they are able to weather the storm without your presence.

I'm sure this thought went through Paul's mind. "If only I could be there with them, then they would be alright." But, what he finds is that despite his importance in their lives, God is more than capable of working with His people, even without Paul.

That shouldn't discourage us when we think that we're somehow not needed if God can do the work without us. The fact is God can do all things without us. However, He has graciously chosen for us to be part of the process of helping and teaching, equipping and encouraging each other in the Lord.

And when we're not able to personally share in someone's growth, praise God He's still there to encourage and to direct their hearts toward Him, even if that means that someone else is used in our place.

And so Timothy brings back good news of their faith and love. Notice how Paul uses those two words in the same breath. Faith and love.

T. Croskery in the Pulpit Commentary say's, "This [love], which was the fruit of their faith, had not waxed cold on account of abounding iniquity. Their faith worked by love. The two graces are always found together."

And it's true. If God has given us faith to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sin, then out of gratitude, our faith will look to God and will love Him above all and our neighbor as our self.

The apostle Paul say's the same thing in GAL 5:6 "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

And even in this very letter Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (1TH 1:3)

It's because of this attitude towards the Lord Jesus Christ that Paul is so excited. He's not saying, 'Boy, they really don't need me after all. They're doing O.K. without me.'

No, he's saying. 'Man, I'm glad your faith doesn't rest on me being there, as much as I would like to be with you. Praise God your faith is genuine and strong without me because it shows that your faith is real and totally dependent on God, not on man or circumstances which might be adverse.'

But, there's another part of Timothy's report that excites and encourages Paul. "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."

There's nothing like reciprocal love; that love which is given by someone to another person which is returned in kind. As much as Paul loved these people, these people also loved Paul and wanted him to come to them as much as Paul wanted to be with them.

That will warm the heart of any Pastor. And as much as I love all of you in this flock, it's encouraging to have your love shared with me and my family.

But, as important as your love is for me, that's not the primary motivation for my love for you. My primary motivation is Christ's love for you, as well as for me, and the work He's called me to.

I do it for Him. But, in the process of doing it for Him I delight in doing it for you. And that should be your primary motivation as well. Love God with all your heart, soul and mind and you will love your neighbor as yourself.

And this is the other thing that excites Paul, even as it excites me. You see, Paul longed to hear from Timothy that the Thessalonian church was standing firm in the Lord by faith which was demonstrated in practical ways of love.

And, again, this is what all Pastors who love their flocks want to see; the people of God standing firm on their most holy faith given to them by God.

And if you want to know how to grow in your faith and the love that accompanies it listen to what the writer of Hebrews says in HEB 12:2 "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross,

scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

When you take your eyes off of Jesus Christ, which means to do anything that puts your eyes on self or someone or something else which would take Christ's place, even if it's for a short time, then you have not done that which is by faith in Him, because in essence you've told Him that you can't trust Him.

And that's what faith is; totally trusting God for every area of your life whether you fully understand it all or not. Look how Paul reacts to this news of the Thessalonians' faith which is demonstrated by love.

1TH 3:7-8 "Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. 8 For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord."

Now, you might be wondering, how the great apostle Paul could make such a statement. "For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord."

The idea here is what H.D.M. Spence and Joseph Exell bring out in the Pulpit commentary on this subject: They say, "the meaning is the good tidings which Timothy has brought have imparted new life unto us."

Quoting Lunemann they continue Paul's thought: "we are in the full strength and freshness of life, we do not feel the sorrows and tribulations which the outer world prepares for us."

In other words, having heard your progress in the Lord it has given us a new lease on life whereas for the last few months things have been pretty tough, even on our faith. Paul's faith was encouraged by this.

Don't forget for the last couple of years he's experienced one trial after another. He's been stoned and left for dead; he's been accused by some of the Jewish brethren of encouraging immorality by watering down the law given by God to Moses; he was beaten with rods and then arrested and thrown in jail with Silas; his life was threatened by an angry mob and he was forced out of town; he was ridiculed by intellectuals in Athens, and then ends up in Corinth at the writing of this letter to the Thessalonians where even the locals in Corinth eventually force him out of town.

Paul could have used an encouraging word. F.F. Bruce makes the comment: "having been expelled from one place after another in Macedonia, Paul and the others might well have wondered, in spite of their confident interpretation of the call of God (as we saw in Acts 16:10) if they had been divinely guided to that province after all."

And believe me many a godly man who has experienced such trials and set backs in his ministry has wondered, even if only for a moment, if they were really doing Gods will as they believed God had called them.

If it were not for the increase of your faith as it's demonstrated itself in love for the brethren and the lost, it would be very easy to be discouraged over this work.

But, I know God has called me here and I see the fruit of His work in your lives. And like Paul I can say, "Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith."

But, with his encouragement, Paul included something for the Thessalonians to consider regarding their faith, even as we should consider the same.

In the NAS and the KJV it's translated, "for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord."

The Thessalonians were presently standing firm, but Paul also wanted them to stand firm in the future as well, and that again, by faith in Christ.

It is for our encouragement as well that we stand firm in the faith Christ has given us. And Paul makes mention of this in a variety of places in the scriptures.

1CO 16:13-14 "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. 14 Do everything in love."

GAL 5:1 "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

Now, back in our text in the next verse, Paul gives the glory where it is due when it comes to their faith and their growth and their love.

1TH 3:9 "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?"

Paul thanks God for them and the way the Lord has worked in their lives. Sure, Paul understands he has played a role, but he also understands that it is only God who can work in the heart of a person to change and motivate them to love and good works as they place their faith in the one true God.

The last part of verse 9 say's, "the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?"

F.F. Bruce quoting O'Brien: "As they constantly remember their friends in thanksgiving and prayer in the presence of our God and Father in (1:3), so now they rejoice over them in God's presence. This consciousness of the divine presence excludes any notion of personal success or fleshly satisfaction on Paul's part. Thus the apostle, with a deep sense of gratitude, turns consciously to God to render thanksgiving for that which makes him rejoice."

We, too, will have many opportunities to be used by God to touch the lives of people, but we like Paul should turn consciously to God and thank Him and glory in His love as He is the one who ultimately touches someone with His love through us.

In this light Paul's role is seen, as the next verse implies, how important he is in God's scheme of things regarding their faith.

1TH 3:10 "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith."

The quality of their faith is probably not in question here. In fact, Paul commends them throughout this letter for their faith and steadfastness, but rather there were probably some areas where they needed to be further taught to strengthen their faith even more.

This would include a knowledge of God to help them appreciate more and more His love for them and His will for them regarding their walk which is to be by faith. Paul talks about this seeking of knowledge, which is not to be confused with the attitude of gaining knowledge for the sake of knowledge which can puff one up.

He say's in COL 1:10-12 "And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, 11 being strengthened with all power according to his

glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light."

Peter also talks about the knowledge of God: 2PE 1:3, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."

And in 2PE 3:18, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen."

Our knowledge of God must grow as we come to His word and seek Him in prayer and as we're filled with His Spirit for His work.

Knowing this, Paul desires to see the Thessalonians and bring them further knowledge of God so as to strengthen them. Again, keep in mind that whatever Paul teaches them is not just to store knowledge in their minds, for the sake of having gathered knowledge, but to have them practice those things they've learned.

This was the apostle John's desire as well.

3JO 1:4 "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

Not simply being hearers only who delude themselves, as James says, but doers of the word. As we are doers of God's word in love, we are actually practicing our faith in His strength. And guess who gets the glory? The one who deserves it. Our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the middle of this exhortation Paul now breaks forth into praise and prayer.

1TH 3:11-13 "Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³ May 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."

Next week we'll take a close look at these last three verses of this chapter as I teach on some of the Theological as well as the practical applications of what Paul says here, but let me just

quickly touch on what Paul says for the sake of encouraging the saints, which includes us.

Paul never ceases to pray for God's people and he specifically prays for the Thessalonians. When we began the book of Acts way back when, we saw some of the primary duties of the apostles as it related to the Body of Christ.

When a problem arose between the Greek Jews and the native Jews because of some of the widows being overlooked in the daily serving of food, the apostles addressed it.

ACT 6:2-4 "So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3 Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

These are some of the most important aspects of the ministry for a Pastor. And yet in many churches today these are neglected because the church expects the Pastor to wear 25 different hats.

That doesn't mean he isn't involved in some way in different things, it just means that his primary duties involve the ministering of the word for the equipping of the saints and praying for the Body.

And that's what Paul did. He ministered the word and prayed for God's people. Prayer is one of those things we all have a tendency to neglect, and yet it's the greatest privilege any Christian has. To come personally before the throne of God and talk with Him, knowing He is listening intently.

In verse 11 Paul recognizes that God is sovereign and that He will do all according to His will. But, as I close I would simply like to concur with Paul and pray for you this morning as he did and to encourage you to stand firm in your faith and to love as Christ first loved you.

1TH 3:12-13 "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as (mine) does for you. 13 May 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."