

7] Concern and Sacrifice in the Midst of Battle (Sunday, January 3, 2021)

Scripture: 10 Commandments; 1 Thess. 3:1-5

INTRODUCTION

I know that I have shared from Matthew 13, the Parable of the Sower, an insight made by a professor I had at Trinity.

There is a connection that can be made, based on this Parable, between persecution and the cares of this world.

Listen to part of the explanation that Jesus gave of His parable in Matthew 13.

Matthew 13:20 But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; **21** yet he has no root in himself, but **endures only for a while**. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he **stumbles**. **22** Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he **becomes unfruitful**.

Persecution and suffering are not romantic.

The true church of Jesus Christ will always be tested. The way that we are tested does vary. In our opinion it is not always equal.

There is a price that is paid during testing. It can purify and cleanse, but there can be pain and loss.

Anyone that has fought in a real war knows it is described as death or even hell.

Frequently we are reminded in Scripture to not ignore the danger of the spiritual battles we face.

The devil loves nothing more than a naïve, sleepy Christian.

What stands out at the start of 1 Thess. 3 is how Paul loved the believers in Thessalonica and his sacrifice and serious concern for them.

We are first going to consider the background and context of our text from 1 Thess. 3 and then focus on verses 1-5.

Take seriously the spiritual battles that you are facing and that others you know are facing!

1] BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Look at the end of 1 Thess. 2 that we looked at 3 weeks ago.

In these verses we see that Paul very much wanted to return to Thessalonica but was hindered somehow by Satan.

As I mentioned, the first readers of this letter definitely knew what the hindrance was. It has not been revealed to us.

Then note the final verses of chapter 2.

The joy for Paul, Silas, and Timothy was the Thessalonians in the presence of the Lord at His coming.

This was their goal.

Before we reach that point, we must continue to live a life of faith and endurance.

We also noted that the language in 2:17 is very strong language – taken away from you translates a word that can be mean to be made an orphan.

There was a very painful separation that had to be made because of the danger of their continued work in Thessalonica and the resolution of the situation that is described in Acts 17.

Now listen to a summary of the next part of this second missionary journey as is described in Acts 17 and 18 and what we have here in 1 Thess. 3.

After Paul and his team left Thessalonica, they went to the city of Berea.

The ministry in Berea was fruitful, but eventually the situation there also became dangerous.

Paul travelled alone to Athens, while Silas and Timothy remained in Berea.

They were requested by Paul to join him in Athens as soon as possible.

While Paul waited for their arrival, we have in Acts 17 a description of his speech on what is called Mars Hill or the Areopagus.

We don't know precisely when, but Silas and Timothy did join Paul in Athens.

Because of their great love for the churches in Macedonia, it was determined that Timothy and Silas return back to these churches to encourage them.

We know that Timothy was sent to Thessalonica.

We are not told specifically, but Silas likely went to Philippi and/or Berea.

Paul then travelled without them from Athens to Corinth.

Eventually both Silas and Timothy returned and from Corinth, Paul and the others wrote the two letters to the Thessalonians.¹

2] LOVING CONCERN IN THE MIDST OF SPIRITUAL DANGER, 1 THESS. 3:1-5

As I studied these verses, I thought how they are very appropriate for a new year.

There is a lot of theology and application connected with these five verses.

I want to emphasize three things:

- 1) Paul's great love and concern for the Thessalonians
- 2) The call to endure suffering

¹ Acts 17:15-Acts 18:5; Lane T. Dennis and Wayne Grudem, eds. *The ESV Study Bible*. Accordance electronic ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008), paragraph 20433.

3) The spiritual dangers that we face

1) Paul's great love and concern for the Thessalonians.

We have to be careful to not exalt any of the characters in Scripture save for the Lord Jesus Christ.

We certainly respect and learn from those like Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

And as we think of Paul, we know that Paul was not a wimp.

Today, we play things very safe.

After the amazing ministry of Paul and Barnabas in the city of Lystra, Paul was stoned and dragged out of the city and left for dead.

The Jews who did this to him thought they had ended this troublemaker.

Did Paul say, I think I need to go back home and recover for the next month or so? Maybe I should go back to tentmaking.

No, somehow Paul's life was miraculously preserved by the Lord, and Paul and Barnabas continued their ministry in the city of Derbe.

Paul might not have been an impressive figure if you saw him, but we can say for certain, he was not a cream puff!

I say this as background to what we have in verse 1 and what is repeated in verse 5.

Paul's great love for the Thessalonians was such that he was willing to give up some of his trusted team members for a time.

I think it is difficult for us to appreciate what this means.

On the surface it might not seem such a big deal.

The only thing that comes to mind as an illustration is a team of three soldiers fighting in a battle and two of them are sent elsewhere leaving one soldier to have to fight for a time on his own.

So, all I can say here is that there must be things from almost two thousand years ago that we can't fully appreciate today in terms of Paul being left alone at least in terms of Timothy and Silas sent to carry out other ministry.

Twice in this passage we see Paul's great concern for the Thessalonians.

In verse 1 and verse 5 we have the phrase translated **no longer endure it**.

What was Paul no longer able to endure?

He wanted desperately to know if the Thessalonians were still walking in terms of the gospel and God's truth.

Think about something that really burdens you, something you just can't stop thinking about.

In many cases, honestly, we are probably concerned about matters not very important.

When is that package going to come or something else that might not be so important?

Here we see what burdened Paul to the point of breaking was his love and passion to see that this church continued to walk in God's truth.

That is a great burden to have.

The word **alone** also expresses the idea of either abandonment or real deprivation.²

As I mentioned, I think it is difficult for us to appreciate the sacrifice that was made for others here.

² Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 13 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 69.

This loving concern and sacrifice is the first thing we see here in chapter 3.

- Pray that we as a church will demonstrate a true heart of spiritual love and concern for others.

2) The call to suffer and endure

Another thing to appreciate from this passage and others is how important Timothy was to many churches in the first century.

Timothy was not simply Paul's errand boy who could come in handy when Paul needed something picked from the dry cleaner.

We see the description given here: he is a brother, a minister of God, and a fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ.

Could there be a more beautiful description of what our calling is to be?

So, while we don't exalt Timothy, how thankful we should be for this man who played a very important role in helping to encourage and strengthen many different churches that were established in Paul's ministry.

Timothy was sent for a very specific mission that is as vital today as when it was first given.

From verse 2, **to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith.**

Our English word steroid comes from the verb translated as establish.

Establish is a good translation, which can mean **2. to cause to be inwardly firm or committed,**

*confirm, establish, strengthen*³

³ BDAG, s.v. "στηριζω," 945.

The verb translated as **encourage** is also a key word in 1 Thessalonians, used 8 times, but not always translated the same way.

In Hebrews this same word is translated as exhort.

Heb. 3:13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

Heb. 10:25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

We love very much the Doctrine of the Preservation of the Saints.

Do you really want to rest in your own efforts as the basis for your confidence?

At the same time, we know that we are not just drifting along waiting for death or the return of Christ.

No, you need to be strengthened in faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This past week an old friend from high school visited my brother and me.

We were talking about the weakness of the church in America and how the response of our nation to COVID has taken a toll on many churches.

I certainly don't know the outcome of all this, but how we should be in prayer for others we know that they will press on through difficulty.

It also struck me how for far too long the message of so many churches is not the solid message and truth of Scripture that Paul and others proclaimed to the Thessalonians.

I certainly can't speak for all churches, but we know far too often the basic message of churches is self-enhancement and improvement, tips for a better life.

The message of the gospel we know has been perverted and twisted.

Obviously, Paul preached a message focused on the Lord Jesus Christ as we see in Acts 17.

Acts 17:2 Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, **3** explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and *saying*, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ."

We can say that the foundation of all that Paul preached was the Lord Jesus Christ and the sovereign grace of a holy, righteous God to save undeserving sinners.

With this message came also the call to discipleship, which is exactly what Jesus also proclaimed.

Discipleship is not gritting your teeth so that you can show others how much you deserve God's grace.

Discipleship is pressing on in the face of difficulty and suffering because you know God's grace to you a sinner.

You press on because you know God's love and that everything sacrificed for Jesus Christ is worth it!

I am going to have us look at the first part of verse 3 in a moment, but let us next consider the second part of verse 3 and verse 4.

You yourselves know that we are appointed to this, that is various afflictions.

John Calvin wrote:

As all would gladly exempt themselves from the necessity of bearing the cross, Paul teaches that there is no reason why believers should feel dismayed on occasion of persecutions, as though it were a thing that was new and unusual, **inasmuch as this is our condition, which the Lord has assigned to us.**

Ananias who played a key role in Paul's conversion and preparation for service was told by God in Acts 9:16

Acts 9:16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake."

Verse 4 repeats this same basic message.

You know very well that when we were with you, this is the message that we shared, that we would suffer tribulation.

Acts 14:21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, **22** strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting *them* to continue in the faith, and *saying*, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."

I pointed out in an earlier message that this verb **to know** is a key word in Thessalonians, used 13 times.

The heart of the Christian faith is God opening your eyes to His truth.

We don't just feel things, we know things. And what we know is the glorious message of salvation and also the call of discipleship, a call to suffer and endure.

The verb **to know** is used 4 times in chapter 2 as Paul gave a defense of his ministry.

The verb **to know** as you can see is used in chapter 3 and verses 3 and 4.

for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.

just as it happened, and you know.

It is neither good to exaggerate what we suffer for Christ or to minimize it.

We know that what believers in countries like Nigeria and China suffer makes anything that we endure look like it is trivial.

With this said and appreciated, we don't know what we will face.

We must seek by God's grace to be ready for whatever it is that we will be called to face, because suffering is not only what all true believers are called to face, but there is also a danger in it.

3) The spiritual dangers that we face

We know that the devil is not sovereign, but we also know that he is extremely clever.

Think of this, you can get someone to move with a touch sometimes more effectively than with a punch.

As you look at the world today, how have Christians who lived under Communist rule fared in comparison to Christians who have lived for several generations under relative ease and pleasure?

I don't know that I can answer this question except to say that in some cases Christians who have lived under great difficulty seem to have far greater zeal and determination than many Christians who have lived under ease and pleasure.

Now, it is not that we wish for more suffering or try to make our lives more difficult.

How thankful we should be for what God has given to us and for the sacrifice of those who have gone before us.

What is the call of God's Word?

1Pet. 5:8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. **9** Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world

What was the danger faced by the Thessalonian church?

Paul was very concerned that because they did go through suffering and testing, that the devil could use this to lead them astray.

What I found interesting in my study of this passage is the first part of verse 3.

That no one should be shaken by these afflictions.

This is the only place where this word translated as **shaken** is used in the NT.

The original meaning of the verb was used of dogs wagging their tail, *the idea of flattery*.

Now, not all commentators understand that this is what Paul is saying here, but it is possible that Paul's concern was that after going through a time of suffering, the opponents of the gospel might try to show great kindness and seek to lead them astray.

J.B. Lightfoot wrote this:

This seems to be the meaning here; **'that no one, in the midst of these troubles, desert the rough path of the truth, drawn aside and allured by the enticing prospect of an easier life.'** This is the temptation alluded to in 1 Thess. 3:5.

If this is a proper understanding, it does support what I mentioned at the start of the sermon – the devil can tempt and seek to lead astray through direct persecution and through the cares of this world.

We have to be ready to endure direct assault and the indirect attack!

In your service for Christ, you will always face and fight the world, your flesh, and the devil.

CONCLUSION

Take seriously the spiritual battles that you are facing and that others you know are facing!

Transition to the Lord's Supper.

From Hymn 432, Jesus What a Friend for Sinners

Jesus! what a strength in weakness!

Let me hide myself in him;

Tempted, tried, and sometimes failing,

He, my strength, my vict'ry wins.

Jesus! what a help in sorrow!

While the billows o'er me roll,

Even when my heart is breaking,

He, my comfort, helps my soul.

Jesus! what a guide and keeper!

While the tempest still is high,

Storms about me, night o'ertakes me,

He, my pilot, hears my cry.

Jesus! I do now receive him,

More than all in him I find,
He hath granted me forgiveness,
I am his, and he is mine.

Prayer

Hymn 357

BENEDICTION – HEBREWS 12:1-3

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.