

1st Thessalonians 3: 1-10; “To Establish and Encourage You”, Sermon # 14 in the series – “A Persevering Faith”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on November 26th, 2017, in the Afternoon Worship Service.

The context of the words that I have just read to you is that the Apostle Paul had been torn away from his beloved brethren at Thessalonica. He was in great danger of being physically harmed if he remained at Thessalonica, and his persecutors pursued him, even as far as Berea, when they heard that he was preaching the gospel to people there, and there were a number who had believed the gospel. It was a greater agony to Paul to think that there were those who were false and unloving people, who claimed to be Christians, who were telling those who had been recently converted there that he did not really care for them; he didn't care about their welfare, or he wouldn't have left them. These whisperers were probably telling the new converts that if Paul was really the great Apostle of God he wouldn't have left them in the time of their persecutions and difficulties. They were probably saying that he only cared about making converts and building churches. But this was not at all the truth.

The truth was, that Paul knew what they were experiencing. He knew that they were experiencing the feeling of orphans who had recently lost their parents. He knew that they felt that he had been taken away from them. Actually, he had only left for a time; to go on to Athens at the bidding of the other brethren. He was not afraid of suffering for Christ. He told them that he had been “endeavoring all the more eagerly to see their faces with great desire”. He had planned to come to them more than once, but Satan had hindered him. Now, in the providence of God he had been led to Athens, and since he had come there, it was obvious to him that God had led him there, to keep him there for a time; and therefore, he was not going to be able to go back to Thessalonica anytime soon.

What was he to do? He could not endure the thought of leaving his spiritual children there at Thessalonica, at the mercy of those who would deceive them. He was very concerned about their faith. The question was: How could he establish and encourage their faith if he could not be there? That is the subject of this afternoon's study. When we find it impossible to personally be with those whom we know need their faith established and encouraged, there are still some things which God can help us to do, to accomplish that holy goal which we have set out to achieve. It is not always an easy thing to be able to establish and encourage the faith of other believers whom we love in Christ. How could the Apostle Paul accomplish his goal of establishing and strengthening the faith of the Thessalonian believers even though he was not there? He could do it by his goal by taking the following actions.

1st of all - He could send Timothy to them in his place.

(Verses 1, 2, and 5 and 6)

“Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith.” This was a very wise and reasonable thing to do. If you cannot go yourself, then send someone else, who is qualified, in your place. If you cannot go yourself, why not think of someone who could do the very thing that you yourself intended to do? Timothy was not an Apostle, but he was a minister of God, just as Paul was. He could communicate everything of the Word of God to them that Paul would have done had he been there. Not only that, but in sending him, Paul was sending one whom he highly valued and esteemed in the work of the Lord. It is especially important in the work of the ministry that when the saints are suffering that there is a pastor there to establish their faith and encourage them.

But it is also important to understand that the pastor is only one man. There may be times when as much as he would like to be with one of the suffering sheep, that there is a legitimate reason that he cannot be there. It is important, in any local church, that the pastor look about him and see if there might be someone who could, in the time when he cannot be there; that another

could. That person should be a person who is able to use the word of God to comfort the afflicted with the promises of grace and to assure them of that help that come only from the Lord. But someone who is able to be there with the afflicted, the disturbed, and the downcast, is a very important part of the ministry. Timothy was perfect for this kind of ministry. What kind of qualities are requisite to be able to minister to people who are in this situation?

Turn over to Philippians chapter 2 with me and we will find out what Timothy was like. Here in this epistle there was a somewhat similar situation to what Paul faced in Thessalonica. In Chapter 2 Paul is exhorting the Philippians in verse 16 to “hold fast the word of life, so that he might rejoice in the day of Christ that he had not run in vain or labored in vain”. He rejoices that he is being poured out in service for the Philippians. He says in verse 17 – “Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.” “For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.” “But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may know of your state.” This is the verse that I want you to see. Verse 20 – “For I have no one who is like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state.” “For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus.” “But you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel.” Paul is spending himself, and he is being spent in the ministry of the gospel. He cannot get around to all of the churches at once. He must come at the time when the Lord permits him. But he can send Timothy.

The qualities that an apostle, or a minister would be looking for, in terms of those who could help minister to those in distress, or difficulty, or discouragement, are found right here. The person who would join in the ministry of building up people should be a person who is like-minded with the one who has already been called into the ministry. He should not be one who is picking apart the pastor’s sermons or trying to point out all of his faults. He should not be a person who is often disagreeing with the minister that he is trying to help in ministry. He should be “like-minded”. The word in the original Greek is *isopsuchon* (ἰσοψυχον) which means, “of a similar spirit”. Timothy would speak and act in very much the same way as Paul would in every situation. He wouldn’t be seeking to be different and distinct and to have his own thoughts on a subject of importance, or a ministry independent of Paul’s. They would work harmoniously together with each other. Timothy would know what Paul would want to do and accomplish with people in terms of both the doctrines preached and how they should be applied. Timothy was also sincerely concerned for the state of the Philippians. He was not a man who was more interested in communicating to people about himself than he was in thinking about the needs of the ones whom he came to minister to.

Verse 21 confirms the unfortunate fact that there are many, many Christians who are only interested in seeking their own interests and they are not interested in seeking Christ’s interests. A person cannot be a helper in the ministry with this kind of attitude and pursuit of selfish interest. But Timothy had proven worth in this regard. “But you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served me in the gospel.” This is the character quality which shines forth in brilliance when it comes to men being qualified to help in the ministry or to be in the ministry. They will serve the pastor as a son with his father; willing to learn, willing to help, willing to watch and wait his time until his father in the faith says that he is ready; ready and willing to go where he would be sent. For how shall they preach unless they be sent? Or recognized by the local church.

These are sterling qualities that should be looked for and recognized. How blessed is the church and how blessed the ministry that has this kind of men in their midst. Certainly we can all learn and benefit from observing Timothy’s way of helping Paul in the ministry. He sent Timothy to “know of their faith”. (verse 5) And Timothy was able to be with them to see their faith; that Satan had not succeeded in turning their hearts away from the truth of the gospel or from the love of Paul himself. “But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you.” What great news for Paul. What a great God we serve who establishes such

precious relationships between Christians that they can truly encourage one another. Ask yourself now; am I like-minded with my pastor? Am I willing to serve him as a son does a father? Am I trying to forward the ministry in every way that I can by having a supportive ministry to others who he cannot see or reach at a given time? These things are of great value for each of us to consider.

2nd – Paul can accomplish his goal of establishing and strengthening their faith by speaking to them of God’s sovereign appointments. (Verses 3, 4, and 7)

Paul says to them in verse 3, “...no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.” “For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.” The trials, the tribulations, the afflictions that the Apostle Paul had gone through and was going through; the trials and persecutions which had come upon the new believers in Thessalonica; he knew that these were something that was appointed by God for them. I wonder if you and I have come to this realization and embraced it? This is a very hard truth for many modern day Christians, living in this society, to swallow. They fondly cherish the hope that they will never have to suffer either mentally or bodily for the gospel or for their stand for the truth of the word of God. But let us take courage. Let us let our hearts take courage from the words of the Apostle this afternoon. He tells us that he was appointed to suffer, even as he took the blessed gospel into Thessalonica.

He did suffer the wrath and persecution of men against him, and he endured by the power of Christ working strongly in him. But we do not find him deterred in any way away from his goal, motivated by his love to Christ and to them, to establish their faith even though he suffered for it. To learn to seek for joy in Christ, and the joy of strengthening and encouraging the faith of others, even while you yourself are suffering trials and tribulations; it one of the greatest things that you may ever be called to as a Christian. James chapter 1, verse 2 brings the truth of the matter right out in front of us who would live the Christian life. “My brethren, consider it all joy when you fall into various trials knowing that the testing of your produces patience.” “But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Now usually, we are accustomed to think, by fleshly thinking, that we are to sorrow and be discouraged and to think that we are lacking in everything when we suffer various trials. The holy attitude of joying and rejoicing in God anticipates that all of God’s appointments are good. “It has been appointed unto you not only to believe, but also to suffer for His name’s sake.” (Philippians 1: 29)

When you embrace by faith the idea that you as a Christian are appointed to trials, tribulations, and sufferings of various sorts, in accordance with the appointment of God, then by Christ’s grace you learn to anticipate them, not with dread, but with anticipation of faith. This is what Paul had, and he was trying to communicate this holy attitude to them. He did not want their faith to be shaken as they saw him suffer afflictions. He wanted their faith to be strengthened. I like the New American Standard’s rendering of Hebrews 13: 7. It says, “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith.” This is what Paul wanted them to do. He would teach them a different perspective from the world’s. In Philippians 3: 8 he says, “Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own which is from the law, but that which through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.” You know that you are making progress in your faith when you see your sufferings for righteousness as a fellowship with the Savior.

If God appoints afflictions and crosses for you to bear, Paul is saying, He will also appoint for you the comforts of seeing the faith of other believers strengthened. He says in verse 7, “Therefore brethren, in all of our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith.” You can see how Paul had truly learned in his practical experience how to be more conformed to the

image of Christ. He had suffered affliction and distress but he was comforted in the outcome. He was comforted that their faith stood strong and they did not walk away from Christ because of sufferings; they walked toward Him and with him. This is the kind of appointment that God makes for you, dear believer, if you will receive it from His hands. Your appointment is to the testing of your faith, and part of the test is to see how you will react to the afflictions of those dear believers who have taught you the gospel. Will their faith during times of suffering lead you to desire to glorify God in the same way, or will you turn away in fear and disgust? Paul's goal with his spiritual children at Thessalonica was to see their faith established, and these believers encouraged, by his encouraging them even while he was suffering. This is learning Christ.

3rd – Paul would accomplish his goal of establishing and strengthening the faith of these believers by exhorting and praying for them. (Verses 8-10)

“For now we really live, if you stand fast in the Lord.” His exhortation to these believers is more of an appeal to them based upon what it would do to Paul and Silas and Timothy if they did not stand fast in their faith in the Lord through these afflictions and trials. It would be a real discouragement to their faith if these believers were shaken by their trials to the point of giving up following after Christ. So he tells them that they (the apostle and those with him) really lived when they heard good reports from Timothy of their faith. This is what a minister of the word and the gospel really lives for; it is to see strong faith in Christ in your life; great joy in Christ even when suffering for him. “For what thanks can we render,” he says, “to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God....” Paul and Silas and Timothy rejoiced for their sake before God, and they were thankful that God was such a strong and mighty God, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that He could give His great grace to young believers, tender believers, in order that they would persevere. O glory to God that it is so.

But Paul does not cease to pray for them when He sees the grace of God at work and some answers to his prayers. No, he says that he was “praying exceedingly, night and day that he might still see their faces and perfect what was lacking in their faith”. This ought to teach us that when we see great victories of faith in young believers; those whom we have taught the word of God to, we ought not to let our guard down and think that we do not need to pray for them. No, we need to pray to God for them all the more, and even be able to tell them, if we are their pastor or teacher, that there are still things which they are lacking in their faith. We see this in other parts of this book. There were things about Christ's coming and the resurrection of the dead that they did not understand rightly yet. There were some things about sanctification that they needed to learn and to grow up into. It was not as though they did not have them in seed form then, but just like the plant that grows from a seed, they needed to be fed the word of God and watered with exhortations related to it, so that they would grow up more into Christ, even beyond what they had.

Let me close this message to you this afternoon by saying that God has appointed the preaching of the word of God to be one of the primary means of seeing your faith perfected and made complete. This is why I speak to you 3 times on the Lord's Day from it. It is when you often hear the word preached to you, and then have the grace and sense to go out from this place intent on abiding in it and doing it, that is what will bring about the realization of the goal which Paul sought for; the establishing and encouraging of the faith of each and every believer in the local church. That is what all of us ought to desire, each of us in the body of Christ, in relation to the other.