

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13
Psalm 119:57-80
Psalm 119:65-72

“The Gospel of Your Faith and Love”

November 19, 2023

Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm in the Bible.

We often don't quite know what to do with it.

Almost every verse refers to God's word – law – statute – rules – commandments.

But far more common is another pair of words:

“I” and “you.”

Because Psalm 119 is a prayer.

And throughout this prayer, the Psalmist has a lot to say about suffering.

“Before I was afflicted I went astray” (v67)

“It was good for me that I was afflicted” (v71)

“I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous,
and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me” (v75)

How do you think about your suffering?

At best, we usually think about our suffering as a test of our individual faith –
and something that we need to endure in order to grow in Christ.

And that's a good start!!

But Psalm 119 encourages us to think of our affliction more cosmically.

Just before the section we read, the Psalmist says,

“Remember your word to your servant, in which you have made me hope.

This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.” (v49-50)

Who is the Servant of the LORD?

What is the promise that gives life?

What if I told you that your suffering – your affliction –

is a part of the “great trial that was prophesied to come upon God's people at the end”?

What if I told you that your suffering was part of God's plan for the ages –

part of what God is doing in order to bring about the salvation of humanity?! (Beale, 100)

Well, that's what it is!

“How should Christians respond to the prognosis of a terminal illness,
to a job loss because of refusal to compromise faith, to the death of a loved one....

Whenever we maintain our faith in Christ throughout these situations,
we demonstrate our identification with the Messiah.” (Beale, 100)

The church will never be healthy unless she suffers for Christ.

Sing TPH 119H (65-72)

Read 1 Thessalonians 3

The thing that Paul wants you to see

is that your suffering – your afflictions – are part of what God is doing
in the great tribulation.

Now – you may have heard it said that the “great tribulation” hasn’t started yet.
But Paul says that it started when Christ came in our flesh.
And it won’t stop until Christ returns again!

John says the same thing in Revelation 1:9 –
“I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and kingdom
and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.”

The tribulation and the kingdom are not two different stages in redemptive history.
They are the *same stage* in redemptive history.

When did the kingdom start?

When Christ came in the flesh.

What will happen when Christ returns?

He will hand over the kingdom to his Father. (1 Cor 15:24)

So the kingdom began to come when Christ came in the flesh –
and it will continue until he returns and puts all his enemies under his feet.
And the tribulation began when Christ came and suffered in our flesh –
and it will continue until he returns and wipes every tear away from our eyes!

And what Jesus is doing in *your life* –
what Jesus is doing in *my life* –
is conforming us to *his likeness*.
Because that is what he is doing with *all creation!*

And your life – your life – our lives – are part of *all creation*.

1. The Exhortation in Your Faith: Steadfastness in Affliction (v1-5)

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

In chapter three, we get a glimpse into Paul’s own experience of what Luke tells us in Acts 17.

In Acts 17, we hear about Paul’s brief stay in Thessalonica –
how he spent three weeks visiting the synagogue,
reasoning with them from the Scriptures,
explaining and proving that it was necessary
for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying,
“This Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ.” (17:3)

Some Jews were persuaded – and “a great many of the devout Greeks

and not a few of the leading women.” (17:4)
But then the Jewish leaders grew jealous
and pulled together a mob to attack Paul and Silas.

The new believers in Thessalonica quickly sent Paul away to Berea –
where the Berean Jews searched the scriptures to see if these things were true.
But then the Jews from Thessalonica sent agitators to pursue Paul –
and so the Bereans sent Paul to Athens
(while Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea).

We are told in chapter 18, verse 5, that Silas and Timothy later joined Paul in Corinth.

So, apparently Silas stayed in Berea for a while.

Based on 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, it appears that Timothy came
and joined Paul briefly in Athens –
or possibly that Paul sent word to Timothy
to go directly from Berea to Thessalonica *rather* than join him in Athens.
Because Paul was concerned for those new believers back in Thessalonica!

Silas is in Berea, so the saints there are being build up in faith, hope, and love –
but what about the saints in Thessalonica!?

If Satan is hindering my attempts to go back to Thessalonica –
then what does that say about what is happening in Thessalonica!?

Timothy – you’ve got to go to Thessalonica!

They are under attack.

They are new believers – some of whom will be under pressure from the Jews
to recant and return to Judaism

Others are Greeks – who will be ridiculed for believing this new-fangled story
about a resurrected Jewish Messiah!

“I feared that the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.”

Paul is worried!

He knows that the Tempter would love nothing better than to undermine their faith.

Do you realize that the Tempter is trying to undermine *your faith*?

Satan has many schemes – but the one that Paul highlights here is suffering.

Satan tells you, “if God loved you, he wouldn’t let you suffer.”

Have you ever felt that one?

If God loves me, why did he let that happen?

And this can come either in terms of our own personal experience –
or in more general terms – why is the world so messed up?

But Paul’s reply to this is to send Timothy to Thessalonica

“to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions.”

Paul wants *you* to understand that affliction – suffering – is not accidental.
For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. (v3)

We were appointed *by God* for this purpose.
What purpose?

For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.” (v4)

This is God’s appointed purpose for you –
that through suffering, you might be conformed to the likeness of Christ.

Paul is not saying that we deserve affliction!
Paul is not saying that suffering is just the way of all things.

No, Paul is saying that *this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.* (1 Cor 4:17-18)

Let’s be clear!

Paul is not saying that we endure affliction for a while now –
but that God will someday make it right.
No – Paul is saying that these afflictions that we endure right now
are *part of what is making it right!*

This light momentary affliction *is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory.*
There is a direct relation between *your suffering* and *eternal glory.*
What is that direct relation?!

The cross of Jesus.

The eternal Son of God came in our flesh –
took our humanity upon himself –
joined our humanity to himself! –
and suffered for us on the cross.

The Heidelberg Catechism points out that Christ:

He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin.
He must be a righteous man because one who himself is a sinner cannot pay for others. (HC 16)

He had to be like us – a true man.
Only Adam’s flesh and blood could pay for Adam’s error.
But it was not enough for him to be a true man.
He must also be a righteous man.

That is why he must be “one who In every respect has been tempted as we are,
yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

Only a true and righteous man could be a fitting, unblemished sacrifice.

Because a true and righteous man may be good.

He may be perfect.

But when a true and righteous man dies for his friend,
what does that really accomplish?

A true and righteous man could possibly die for one person –
but that would only cover half of what one person owed.

Because we not only owe God for all of our sins,
we also owe him the penalty for all those years we wasted!

Even a true and righteous man cannot bear all that!
And so Heidelberg Catechism question 17 asks:

17. Why must he at the same time be true God?

*He must be true God so that by the power of his divine nature
he might bear in his human nature the burden of God's wrath,
and might obtain for us and restore to us righteousness and life. (HC 17)*

It must be a son of Adam who would repair Adam's fault.
But no son of Adam could survive the wrath and curse of God.

Calvin has a beautiful way of explaining why Christ had to be both God and man:
“His task was so to restore us to God's grace as to make of the children of men, children of God;
of the heirs of Gehenna, heirs of the heavenly kingdom.

Who could have done this had not the selfsame Son of God become the Son of man,
and had not so taken what was ours as to impart what was his to us,
and to make what was his by nature ours by grace?...

It was his task to swallow up death.
Who but the Life could do this?

It was his task to conquer sin.
Who but very Righteousness could do this?

It was his task to rout the powers of world and air.
Who but a power higher than world and air could do this?

Now where does life or righteousness or lordship and authority of heaven lie but with God alone?
Therefore our most merciful God, when he willed that we be redeemed,
made himself our Redeemer in the person of his only-begotten Son.”

(Inst. II.xii.2)

But God doesn't just wave his magic wand and zap you into salvation!
(God doesn't have a magic wand! He's not like that...)

No, it's far better than that!

He joins us *to himself*.

Think back to Paul's beautiful statement in 2:8 –

“we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own souls.”

Paul and Silas and Timothy have been joined to the life of God.

And so they now share their own souls with others.

This is why Paul says that he sent Timothy,

“our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ.”

How do you get to be God's coworker?!

Easy!

Be joined to the life of God.

Become a partaker of the divine nature through Jesus Christ!

Now that his energy is at work in you – you are a coworker of God!

And so there is nothing surprising or earth-shaking about these afflictions.

If our Lord Jesus suffered in the flesh,

then we should expect to suffer with him.

This is what Paul had told them when he was present –

and now what they have heard from Timothy during his sojourn with them.

In verse 5, Paul lapses into the singular:

“when I could bear it no longer”!

Paul realized that he himself could not go to the Thessalonians –
but he could send Timothy!

This is why I have a hunch that Timothy never made it to Athens.

While Paul was alone in Athens,

he made the decision to send Timothy from Berea back to Thessalonica.

“Don't bother coming to Athens – I'll be fine!

Go to the church of the Thessalonians and make sure that they are okay!

*I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you
and our labor would be in vain. (v5)*

Notice how Paul thinks of this:

if Satan lures people away from the faith,

then “our labor would be in vain.”

After all, the task is not just to “make converts.”

The task is to *make disciples*.

Disciples are those who are learning to observe what Jesus commanded.

Disciples are those who are putting into practice the way of Christ's kingdom.

This is why I am never impressed by those who trumpet the number of converts in their ministry.

If a thousand people “pray the prayer” – but 900 of them fall away –

that is half the ministry of one who disciples 200 – all of whom remain faithful.

The reality, of course, is mixed!

We need those who are good at bringing them in –
and those who are good at training them up –
and those who are good at bringing them home.

Indeed, from what we can see in Paul’s ministry,
it looks like Paul was often the one “bringing them in” –
and then Silas and Timothy would focus on “training them up” –

which is the central section of our passage in verses 6-10:

2. The Good News of Your Faith and Love: Joy in the Midst of Affliction (v6-10)

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

Paul has a lovely phrase here – “the good news of your faith and love.”
The *gospel* – the euangelion –
ordinarily refers to the announcement of what God has done in Jesus.
And that is *exactly* what Paul is saying here!

It is that same gospel that Timothy has reported back to Paul!
Hey Paul, wanna hear the gospel?
Yes, Timothy! What is it?
Jesus is still at work in Thessalonica!
The Church there is faithful to Jesus – and they are steadfast in affliction –
and they remember you kindly and long to see you soon!

The gospel – the good news of what Jesus has done – is still at work.
“For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.” (v8)

And when Paul says “now we live” –
he’s talking about eternal life – spiritual life – *real* life!!

After all, the same Spirit who came upon Jesus in his baptism at the Jordan River
has now come upon you – as you have been baptized by one Spirit into one body!

And as long as His Spirit is at work in you,
you will continue to be a *living* embodiment of the gospel of God!
(It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me!)

⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

Sure – fine – we are afflicted!
Of course we are!
What else would you expect?

I have been crucified with Christ!

But now – even now – even in the midst of trial and affliction –
even in the midst of persecution and trouble –

“What thanksgiving can we return to God for you
for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God.”

Paul is once more modeling for us the pattern of life that we should live!

What joy is ours because you are standing fast!

Over the years we have sent out literally hundreds of members around the world.

I’m not able to keep up with all of them.

Some keep in close touch – while others drift away –

but over the years we’ve been able to see and hear from several dozen –

and it is always a tremendous joy to see them walking faithfully with God!

And Paul says that *we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith.*

As they rejoice in the steadfastness and faithfulness of the saints,

Paul and Silas and Timothy continue to pray earnestly for the church in Thessalonica –
that they might see them face to face.

Letters are good.

Timothy’s visit and report is one step better!

(I’m sure a phone call or a Zoom chat would be great!)

But we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face.

Hearing a digital reproduction of your voice is not the same thing.

A digital facsimile of your face is not your face!

The only way I can see you face-to-face is if we are present together *in the flesh.*

Other forms of communication are good – but they lack embodiedness.

Why is this so important for Paul?

We want to supply what is lacking in your faith.

What does Paul mean by that?

If you *have faith* – then what could possibly be lacking in your faith?

At the beginning of 1 Thessalonians

we saw that what Paul wants to see is for you to continue to grow
in faith, hope, and love.

The *work of faith* is holding fast to Christ –

believing him – trusting him – even when all around you seems hopeless.

Our labor of love is enabled and empowered by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us –

indeed the Holy Spirit *is* the love of God who has been poured into our hearts –
because God is love!

And when the God who is love is poured into your heart – you also begin to love.

This is why the work of faith (believing God even when it's hard) –
and the labor of love (loving one another – even when it's hard!) –
can only happen with the third leg of our stool:

“your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

So with respect to the *beginning* of the Christian life – faith is the greatest!
With respect to the *content* of the Christian life – love is the greatest!

But in 1 Thessalonians 1, 3, and 5, the greatest of these is *hope*.
Faith is what gives us access to God.
Love is what will endure through all eternity.

But how do we get from here to there?

You can never do without faith and love!
If you lose faith, or if you stop loving – you won't have hope.

But what is it that enables us to endure (this is the idea behind “steadfastness”)?
What is it that you hold on to when the world is crashing down around you?

“your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Hope has to do with the future.
What is your hope?

What is it that motivates you to do the things you do?
Some people are motivated by stuff and status:

“I hope that I'll get a paycheck!”

And so they go to work and do the things – in the hope of getting paid.

Some people are motivated by what people think of them:
“I hope that so-and-so notices what I did!”

But if I am motivated by *what* I get – or if I am motivated by *how* I feel –
that suggests that my *hope* – the thing that drives me –
is centered on myself.
And every self-centered hope
is a hope that will fail me.

But there is one hope that will not fail!
There is one future that will endure forever!

“your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

What will hope in Jesus mean for you tomorrow?
He has already poured out his Holy Spirit upon you – to join you to himself –
so that already, you are joined to his life!

Hope in our Lord Jesus Christ means that in what you are doing – at every moment – is connected to Jesus.

He is at work in you –

“and I am sure of this – that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Phil 1:6)

Hope says “YES! – that’s what I’m looking forward to!”

“That’s what I’m longing for!!”

And so I will keep believing God in my work of faith.

I will keep loving God and neighbor in my labor of love.

Because of my steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ!

So – what is lacking in your faith is endurance.

What is lacking in your faith is simply that your faith has not *yet* persevered to the end!

This is where we start to see the return of *hope* into Paul’s letter.

He’s been focusing in this chapter on *faith* –

We sent Timothy “to establish and exhort you in your faith” (v2)

“I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that...the tempter had tempted you” (v5)

Now Timothy has brought “the good news of your faith and love” (v6)

And we “have been comforted about you through your faith” (v7)

And we seek to “supply what is lacking in your faith” (v10)

But even though he doesn’t use the *word* “hope” in chapter 3,

the *concept* of hope is very much the whole point of verses 11-13:

3. The Benediction of Your Faith and Love: That Our God and Father May Establish Your Hearts at the Coming of Our Lord Jesus [Hope] (v11-13)

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

This hope is spelled out in verse 13:

that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

That hope is the motivating power of the gospel.

If your hope is that you will have a comfortable life –

that’s not a Christian hope.

If your hope is that you will pass on a tidy inheritance to your kids –

that’s not a Christian hope.

The Christian hope is that the Lord Jesus will make you increase and abound in love

for one another and for all – as we do for you.

The Christian hope is that the Lord Jesus will establish your hearts blameless in holiness

before our God and Father, at the coming of the Lord Jesus with all his saints.

It is worth noting that Paul uses a singular verb in verse 11,

which means that he thinks of “our God and Father” and “our Lord Jesus”
as being *one God*.

You may have noticed that when we speak of God, we always use singular verbs.

You can use plural verbs

when you speak of how the persons of the Trinity relate to one another.

So for instance, all three persons of the Trinity appeared at the Jordan River.

They were all present – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And yet, Paul prays that the Father and the Son may *direct* (singular)
our way to you.

Because God is One.

Paul thinks the Christian life as a life lived at the intersection of the cross and resurrection of Christ.

We share in the sufferings of Christ – we share in his trials and tribulation.

But we also share in his resurrection glory –

not just “someday”!

But already – by faith – we see *him* sitting at the right hand of God.

Already – by faith – we have been *raised* with him and are seated *with him* in the heavenlies.

That is our present identity.

I have been crucified with Christ (there is the suffering with him),

and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me –

and the life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God,

who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:20).

This is our present reality *in Christ*.

Our understanding of this – and our experience of this – is still pretty fragmentary!

It’s the “already” and the “not yet.”

We are already sanctified in Christ Jesus.

But we are not yet what we shall be!

Over the next couple weeks, we’ll look more at what Paul means by this –

because he will explore more in chapter 4 what he means by being ‘blameless in holiness’ –

and what he means by “the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”

For today, it is sufficient to say

that Paul’s prayer – our prayer – is that the Lord would make you increase and abound in love
for one another and for all!

Do good to all people – and especially to those of the household of faith.

We have a special call to love one another in the body of Christ –

but that special call is to overflow in love for everyone around us –

because this is how the love of Christ continues to grow and increase in all the earth.

If we do not love one another – how is anyone supposed to believe that Jesus is raised from the dead?

Jesus goes so far as to pray in John 17:21 –

“that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you,
that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

This follows up on what Jesus had said in John 13:35 –
“By this all people will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another.”

If Christians do not love one another –
then we are not Christ’s disciples.
If Christians do not display visible unity with one another –
then the world has the right to say that the Father did not send the Son.

And before you point the finger at someone else for their failure to love –
how often have *I* failed to love?

As we’ll see next time, “blameless in holiness” is rooted here in “abounding in love.”
Francis Schaeffer used to say that you could counterfeit holiness –
that’s called legalism.
And you can counterfeit love –
that’s called permissiveness.

But you cannot counterfeit holiness and love together!
Holiness and love.
Justice and mercy.

Holiness is not cold and rigid – but warm and *beautiful!*
(Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!)
Justice is not harsh and cruel.
Neither is mercy a license to get away with anything.

I remember a man who was holding forth the standard of holiness –
showing how Christ calls us to walk pure and blameless before him.
The young man before him was obviously a little distraught – “I fall so far short...”
But the older man then smiled and pointed to the cross of Christ –
the one who took our sin and our shame upon himself.

Only the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ can hold these things together –
as Greg Beale puts it (p111):

“The focus here is not on what God does to his people at the end of history
but on God’s work in the lives of his people *until* they share Christ’s glory at his final coming.”

This is God’s work in us – this is the work of faith, the labor of love,
the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ!