

## 1 Thessalonians 3 (1-5) – Don't be Moved by Afflictions

One of the greatest temptations for professing Christians is apostasy. Which is when someone leaves the Christian faith altogether. Or they leave the true faith for a perversion of the faith. They might not visibly leave the faith, but they start accepting a heretical view of the faith. Or they might say they believe, but they don't live like a believer. Again, apostasy is when people fall away from the faith, or they fall for a perversion of the faith. It is very common to see today. And the Bible talks about it a whole lot.

Why does this happen? The Bible gives us several reasons. But a prominent reason is that apostasy happens because people don't think what they've been involved in is working the way they want it to, or the way they think it ought to. The thought process is, "I'm having trouble, so this must not be right." "I'm not enjoying this anymore, it's too hard, it seems like it's unnecessary." "I know other people who are Christians but they don't go through all these things I do." "Maybe I'm doing it wrong." "I feel better not going to church." "Maybe I should go to this other church." "Maybe if I did it this other way, then I would be happier." "I don't want to fake joy." "There must be something more, something I'm missing." Difficulties, drudgery, frustrations, hardships, a feeling of hopelessness, pain, persecution, problems, suffering, trials, and troubles can tempt people to think, "This just isn't right." And so, they want to try something else, some other way.

I can understand this. People want to see success in dealing with stress. They want to be around others who might have some of the same stress issues, but who seem to be coping better than they are. That way, they can see and find a better way to deal with life. That isn't necessarily a bad thing. The problem is when people are tempted to take a false way, simply because it seems to work. They put the "it seems to work" part ahead of the "is it faithful to God" part. Worse, they might conclude that if it seems to work that means it *is* faithful to God. But the Bible teaches that true Christians will suffer affliction. And that falling away from the true faith into something that feels easier and happier and less messy is a real danger.

Now, this doesn't mean that the faithful path is always the hardest path. And it is true that you will avoid a lot of problems if you obey God's way. But you can't use a pragmatic yardstick to measure faithfulness to God. And you can have assurance and growth and joy in afflictions.

These days, apostasy it is often called "deconstruction." You see it a lot with public personalities who start embracing positions that swim with the cultural tide but against historic Christianity. Or maybe you know people who went to church for a while, but who now live as if they never did. And such people might talk about intellectual reasons for denying a faith they once believed in. But most often, people are reacting to pressure from the culture, a fear of persecution, or suffering the necessary hardships and godly limitations of the Christian life. And if you peel back the layers of their so-called deconstruction, you will most often find that people have been moved from a foundation that wasn't so strong to begin with.

Christians need to be established into a faith that understands how God uses affliction in the life of a believer. Through affliction, God teaches the believer perseverance, obedience, how to comfort others, and deeper fellowship with Jesus. As well as becoming a powerful witness. And having been established, believers still need to be exhorted. People need to have their affections stirred in afflictions. So that when afflictions come, they aren't moved away from God, but towards God.

That is the setting of 1 Thessalonians. Paul is warning the church not to be moved away from the faith by afflictions. And in chapter 1, Paul told them that he knew they were doing well. But he is recalling the story of how he came to find that out here in chapter 3. And you see him sound the alarm, and send Timothy, to make sure they heeded the warnings against apostasy. And these warnings are just as important today as they were back then.

*Vs.1-2 – Therefore when we could bear it no longer – This looks back to 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20. Paul was pleased with the Thessalonian church. They gave him great joy. And he wanted to see them and see how their faith was*

holding up, and to help them (compare with vs.5). But he was unable to come. And Paul didn't want to wait any longer. So, he decided to send Timothy – *we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ.* For this reason – *to establish and exhort you in your faith.* And for this result, what we read in vs.3 – established and exhorted so that no one would be moved by afflictions.

Vs.3 – *that no one be moved by these afflictions.* This idea of being moved means being tempted to take some other way than Christianity. But it also means being moved away from God's plan for our affliction because we desire some other, less troubling way. And there are always false teachers, within Christian circles and churches, who are promoting such false ways. The idea that grace is a license to sin, is one such false way. The book of 2 Peter deals strongly with this. And the idea that Christianity is a means to avoid affliction, if you're doing it right, is another false way. And Paul is attacking that apostate way right here in our passage today.

This word translated as afflictions here in vs.3 is translated elsewhere as tribulation, anguish, persecution, burden, or trouble. You get the idea. People can be moved away from the faith by afflictions. And the word translated as "moved" means shaken. But it came from the idea of a dog wagging its tail. Affliction comes, and then the temptation to take some new course comes wagging its tail like a dog, seeking your attention. And it is all too easy to fall for an easier way. This is why there are so many stories and teachings and warnings about this in the Bible.

Falling away from the faith, or falling for a perversion of the faith, whether the trouble be persecution, peer pressure, pain and suffering, or other afflictions, this is what the book of Hebrews is about. Hebrews teaches that Jesus is superior to the old ways of Judaism without Jesus. And so, the writer of Hebrews says don't let persecution for your faith and sufferings in the faith lead you away from the faith. Don't leave the truth for less trouble. Stay with the suffering Jesus. And share in his sufferings. It has never been the most popular message. But it has always been God's plan for God's people.

*For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.* Without a good foundational understanding of the God-designed place of affliction in the life of the believer, we are in great danger of being moved to take a wrong turn. Timothy was going to make sure that the Thessalonians were established, and then exhorted, and encouraged. That is the necessary, proper order. You must be established in the faith, in the truth that afflictions are part of God's plan. And then, being set on the proper course, you can be properly encouraged as to staying the course.

Paul says you were *destined* for afflictions. The Bible doesn't teach that you are destined unless you have the right faith, the right kind of obedience, or perform some kind of work, and then you won't have to suffer afflictions. Of course, a great deal of suffering could be avoided by simply obeying God's Word. Our negligence and lack of discipline and sinful habits can lead to bad things. But even if we are "living right" things that seem wrong can and will still happen. This is not negative thinking, this is positive thinking about God and faith in him, despite troubles. This is a renewed mind.

Through affliction (suffering, persecution, trials), God teaches the believer perseverance. 1 Peter 5:8-10 – *Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.*

Through affliction God teaches the believer obedience. Hebrews 5:8 – *Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.*

Through affliction God teaches the believer how to comfort others. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 – *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*

Through affliction God gives the believer a deeper fellowship with Jesus. Philippians 3:10 – *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings.*

Through affliction God uses the believer as a powerful witness. 1 Thessalonians 1:4-7 – *For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.*

Vs.4 – *For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction.* Paul had spent considerable time teaching and repeating the truth of how God uses affliction in the life of true believers. Romans 5:3-5 – *Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.* Assurance, growth, and joy in afflictions. That is the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting to note that the word translated as affliction here in 1 Thessalonians 3:4 is the same word translated as “narrow” in Matthew 7:14 – *For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.* Affliction is a necessary result of believing the gospel and following Jesus. Philippians 1:29 – *For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.* And affliction with assurance and growth and joy is a mark of the true believer. Turn your Bibles back to 1 Thessalonians 1:4-7 – Paul knew they were chosen by God because the Holy Spirit had worked conviction to stay the course, and gave them joy even in affliction. And this made them a powerful witness to the worth of Jesus. Assurance and growth and joy in afflictions. Paul was suffering, and so were the Thessalonians – *just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.* And Paul wanted a report on their faith.

Vs.5 – *For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith.* Paul was concerned – *for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.* The issue is often that people are not established in the truth of how God uses affliction. And so, they are moved by these afflictions, and other people encourage them in the wrong way. If you're not established in the correct way, then you will be moved to be encouraged and encourage others in the wrong way.

We get tempted to try some new way because the way we've been going doesn't seem "to be working." We get deceived when we think it must be good since so many others follow it, or it seems to work for some people. And what we are doing is short circuiting the work of God by being moved off the right path and onto the new way, which again is the wrong way.

This is where a renewed mind is put into practice. False prophets are using the Bible to draw people into a false way, whether those false teachers realize it or not. Some are outright charlatans; others are just seriously deceived. They became deceived because they were not established in the truth of affliction, and now they spread the false foundation to others. But affliction is something that helps us press into God as he conforms us to his image.

God tests your faith, not to prove your faith to him, but for him to prove your faith to you. 1 Peter 1:6-7 says – *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* Sometimes the trials of your faith really burn, but they prove your faith to you. And to the watching world, which is what the book of James is talking about, that your faith is evidenced by your works. And in regards to your suffering, your work is your faithful witness despite hardships. Don't be moved from God by afflictions. Be moved to God through afflictions. Then you will find assurance, and growth, and joy, and your life will be a powerful witness. That is the power of the Holy Spirit. That is the good plan of God.