

1 Thessalonians 3

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

Wherefore, when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone, and sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellow-labourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith: that no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto. For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know. For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain.

But now when Timotheus came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith and charity, and that ye have good remembrance of us always, desiring greatly to see us, as we also to see you: therefore, brethren, we were comforted over you in all our affliction and distress by your faith: for now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God; night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith? Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: to the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

A Chapter About Hope

Chapter 3 of 1 Thessalonians opens with faith and love and closes with hope. More precisely: it is a chapter saturated with faith, touched again and again with love, and yet whose great subject — the thing the Thessalonians needed most — is hope. Faith appears in verses 2, 5, 6, 7, and 10. Love appears in verses 6 and 12. And hope — the third leg of the three-legged stool — is what the whole chapter is building toward, arriving at last in the closing line: *at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints*.

The Thessalonians had faith. They had love. What they were lacking, what was to be perfected in them, was a clearer understanding of the hope — what exactly the coming of the Lord entailed, and how the departed brethren would not miss out. Chapter 4 supplies that. Chapter 3 prepares the heart for it.

When He Could No Longer Forbear

The chapter opens with an intensity that is striking. *When we could no longer forbear* — Darby renders it, *when we could no longer refrain*. There was something the apostle just had to do. He held off as long as he could, and then he could hold off no longer. He had to send Timothy to find out how his beloved Thessalonians were doing.

The same language appears again in verse 5: *when I could no longer forbear*. And later, in verses 6, 10, and 11, the same intensity of desire to see them comes through — desiring greatly to see them, praying night and day exceedingly, asking God Himself to direct the way back to them. This is not hyperbole — not words chosen to produce a good impression. The apostle Paul was unable to sleep on some nights because he was praying to see the Thessalonians face to face. He prayed in the daytime too, in the middle of whatever else he was doing. *Night and day, praying exceedingly*. That is what he meant. He meant it.

Faith Encouraged — And Endangered

Verse 2 speaks of sending Timothy to establish them and to comfort or encourage them *concerning your faith*. Faith has an object — the Lord Jesus Christ Himself — and there is such a thing as the proportion or ratio of faith. When the tempter puts temptations before us, the natural thing is to fixate on the temptation. But when temptations come, they are the very occasion for greater occupation with Christ by faith. The apostle said he sent to know *your faith* — not first of all whether they had given in to the temptation, but what was the state of their faith. Because it is faith that matters most. The world is full of currents of unbelief and infidelity. The soul needs constant encouragement concerning its faith.

Good Tidings — Faith, Love, and Good Remembrance

Timothy's report brought three things: faith, charity, and good remembrance of the apostle. Faith and love are two of the great three. The third — good remembrance — is not hope, but it is not nothing. It is a good state of heart. And that report was life to the apostle: *for now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord*.

What feeds and sustains the servant of God is knowing that those in whom he has laboured are standing firm. Timothy's good tidings ministered life to Paul's soul. This is very different from Corinth, where there was quite a lot of harsh speech about the apostle going on. Here there was mutual longing — the Thessalonians desiring to see him, and he praying night and day to see them. Love was having its way.

Perfecting What Was Lacking in Their Faith

Verse 10 speaks of perfecting what was lacking in their faith. This is not a matter of correction — they were not in a faulty state. What was lacking was not their fault; they had simply not yet been taught certain things. Their faith was real and

standing firm. It just needed to be completed. The occasion of the problem about the departed brethren gave the apostle the opening he needed to bring before them the full order of events at the coming of the Lord.

There is no arrival point in the perfecting of faith. As love is to increase and abound — without a terminus — so faith is to be built up and completed without any notion of having reached a level at which no further growth is possible. The doctrine of a perfectionism that puts a mark on a plateau and says *I have arrived* is not what this verse has in view. The perfect law of liberty, as James calls it, is precisely the freedom to continue going forward — always more, always further, because the object of faith is Christ, who is inexhaustible.

The Intensity of the Hope

Here is the key thought that unlocks this chapter. The apostle Paul could not refrain himself from sending Timothy because of the intensity of his desire to know how the Thessalonians were doing. He prayed night and day, exceedingly. He wanted to see their face. When he was ready, he went back. He went back when he could no longer refrain himself.

Now — when is the Lord Jesus going to come again? He will come when He can no longer refrain Himself. When the time appointed by the Father is communicated, He will come. And it is not any lack of desire or interest on His part that has delayed His coming to this moment. The apostle Paul's language — *when I could no longer forbear* — conveys intensity of feeling toward those he loved. And if we had a proportion of hope to see the face of the Lord Jesus that corresponded to the proportion of hope Paul had to see the Thessalonians, our faith and love and hope would stand a great deal firmer. We would be much happier Christians.

God Himself — and Our Lord Jesus — Direct Our Way

Verse 11 is one of the most touching in the epistle. *Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you.* The sentence could have read without the word *himself*, and it would have been grammatically complete. But *himself* brings something personal and tender. It is not just a general appeal to divine providence — it is God Himself, personally, being asked to open the way. And the singular verb in the Greek — though two persons are named — expresses the perfect unity of purpose between the Father and the Son. One article covers both, and one verb unites them in their action.

The word *our* before Father is a word of relationship and family. And the form *our Lord Jesus* — the form so characteristic of this epistle — draws out the affections rather than pressing the full title. These touches of the personal and the tender are in keeping with the state of the saints being addressed: a people whose hearts are genuinely engaged with God and with Christ, whose faith and love are real.

Increase and Abound in Love — Unblameable in Holiness

Verse 12 asks the Lord to make them increase and abound in love. And verse 13 gives the purpose: that He may establish their hearts unblameable in holiness before God, at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

The coming with all His saints — this is the appearing, the manifestation. He comes first for His saints in the rapture; He comes subsequently with all His saints at the appearing. It is at the appearing that faithfulness will be manifested, that responsibility will be displayed, that the hearts of the saints will be put on show — showing how much Christ has meant to them, how much they have lived for Him. This is why the appearing and not the rapture is in view here: it is the time of manifestation.

And what enables that manifestation to be beautiful is love — genuine, divine, increasing love — that leads inward to holiness, not outward to entanglement.

The love that increases in the direction of establishing the heart in holiness before God: that is the love of this verse. It is the love that the Lord Jesus displayed — holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners — and it is the love He works in us as we wait for His coming, and grow toward the day of His appearing.

— *Study ends* —