1 Thessalonians 3:6–13

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

> *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.*

Good Tidings — Faith, Love, and Good Remembrance

Timothy's return brought a very happy report. The Thessalonians had virtually nothing in hand — no completed Scripture, only the words of the apostle delivered in three weeks of ministry. Yet they had persisted in the profession they made, in the face of persecution, and the report was full of encouraging things.

Three things are named in verse 6: their faith, their love, and their good remembrance of the apostle. It is not hard to notice that these are very close to the great three — faith, love, and hope. The first two are there. The third is replaced

by good remembrance. A good remembrance of the apostle is not to be dismissed — it reflects a healthy state. But it is not the same as the living, forward-reaching hope that the epistle will unfold in chapter 4. What was lacking in their faith was precisely the clearer understanding of the Lord's coming, which the apostle is preparing to give them.

Now We Live, If Ye Stand Fast

Verse 8 is one of the most tender verses in the epistle: *for now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord.* Of course the apostle was not literally dead in the absence of good news. But it captures something real about what feeds and sustains the servant of God — what is, in a manner of speaking, life to him. To know that those in whom one has laboured are going on, standing firm, holding to the faith — that is a source of joy and renewal. Timothy's good tidings about Thessalonica ministered life to the apostle's soul.

This stands in marked contrast to Corinth. At Corinth there was quite a lot of harsh speech about the apostle going on. Here there was mutual desire — the Thessalonians longing to see the apostle, the apostle longing to see them. Love was having its way. And that mutual encouragement was a source of real joy, expressed in verse 9 as a joy before God, night and day.

Perfecting What Was Lacking in Their Faith

The apostle's desire to see them in person had a double object: the joy of seeing them face to face, and the completing of what was still lacking in their faith. That word *perfect* does not mean reaching a terminus — a point of arrival at which no more progress is possible. It means completing, maturing, bringing to its full expression. Their faith needed not correction but completion: the fuller understanding of the Lord's coming that the apostle was about to unfold.

What was lacking was not their fault. They had not been taught it yet. The epistle itself becomes the means of that completion — what the apostle could not say in person he says in writing, and so we have it for our own faith to be completed too. Light received increases light. They had received much in three weeks and were standing fast in it. Now they were to receive more, and the occasion of their genuine difficulty about the departed brethren provided the moment for these deeper truths to be unfolded.

Himself — Three Tender Touches

There are three places in this section and the following chapter where the word *himself* is used in a way that could have been omitted and the sentence still read perfectly well. Verse 11: *Now God himself and our Father*. Chapter 4:16: *the Lord himself shall descend from heaven.* Chapter 5:23: *the God of peace himself.* In each case the addition of *himself* brings something personal and touching into the statement. It draws the heart toward the Person. This is exactly in keeping with the state being addressed — a people whose affections are genuinely engaged with God and with Christ, whose faith and love are real.

God Himself and Our Father — Touching the Affections

Verse 11 calls upon both God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ to direct the apostle's way back to the Thessalonians. Darby notes that in the Greek one article covers both *God* and *Father,* pointing to one Person — the Father — in His character as both God and Father. And the word *our* before Father is a word of relationship, of family, of tenderness. Following that comes the Lord Jesus — again with the form that marks out this epistle, touching the affections rather than pressing the full title.

The singular verb in verse 11 is worth noting: he directs, not they direct. Two persons are named, yet the verb is singular — the perfect unity of purpose

between the Father and the Son, acting as one in their direction of the servant. This is consistent with John 1:17, where *grace and truth came by Jesus Christ* uses a singular verb for two things so united as to be one subject.

Increase and Abound in Love — Without a Terminus

Verse 12 asks the Lord to make them increase and abound in love toward one another and toward all. 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.

Love and holiness are inseparably joined here. It is not the case that an increase in love could lead one into unholy associations — as though the warmth of love might overflow the banks of what is due to God. The specific love in view here is the love that has as its end the confirming of the heart in holiness. The Lord Jesus was holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners (Hebrews 7:26), and that was not a limitation on His love — it was its expression. He never entered into a defiling fellowship or association. Love that truly increases leads toward greater holiness, not away from it. When one prays for love to increase so as to enter into ecumenical fellowship at the expense of what is due to Christ, that is a different kind of love entirely from what this verse has in view.

There is no arrival point in the increase of love. Yesterday it was somewhat less. Today it is what it is. Tomorrow it should be more. This is what James calls the perfect law of liberty — Christians have the liberty to abound and increase without a terminus. Perfectionism that sets a mark and says I have arrived at the place of which I can be proud — that very pride is evidence the flesh is still very much in operation. The law of liberty knows no such arrival point. We can have as much of Christ in our lives as we want. Our lives will show how much of Christ we have wanted.

At the Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ with All His Saints

The chapter closes with the coming of the Lord Jesus — and here it is His coming with all His saints. This is the appearing, the manifestation, the outshining of His coming — the second aspect of the one second coming. He comes first for His saints in the rapture; He comes subsequently with all His saints at the appearing. The distinction is established in 2 Thessalonians 2, where the Antichrist is destroyed by *the appearing of his coming* — that compound phrase showing that it is a specific phase of the one coming that is in view.

The appearing is brought before us here in connection with being established unblameable in holiness — because the appearing is the time when faithfulness will be manifested and responsibility will be reckoned. It is not at the rapture that this takes place, for the rapture is grace applied equally to every member of Christ's body. It is at the appearing that the reward of faithfulness is given and the saints are manifested in glory with Him.

The Lord Jesus — that form of His name, touching affection, characteristic of this epistle — is used here at the end of the chapter. This whole coming, in both its aspects, is wrapped up with the heart's love for Him. Whether one is waiting for Him to come for us, or looking forward to appearing with Him in glory — the motive and the joy of it all is Himself.

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