
1 Thessalonians 3

Verses 1-13: Timothy Sent -- The Bonds of the One Body -- The Any-Moment Hope
Bible Reading

Opening Reading -- 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13 (Darby)

Wherefore, being no longer able to refrain ourselves, we thought good to be left alone in Athens, and sent Timotheus our brother and fellow-workman under God in the glad tidings of Christ, to confirm you and encourage you concerning your faith; that no one might be moved by these afflictions... But Timotheus, having just come to us from you, and brought to us the glad tidings of your faith and love... for this reason we have been comforted in you, brethren, in all our distress and tribulation, through your faith; because now we live if ye stand firm in the Lord... But our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you; and the Lord make you to exceed and abound in love toward one another and toward all, even as we also toward you; to the confirming of your hearts unblameable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

A Chapter Structure Built Around the Lord's Coming

The chapter divisions of 1 Thessalonians are of some interest. The man who marked the book into chapters was not inspired, but he seems to have read on until he reached a verse about the coming of the Lord, then placed a chapter division. Chapter 1 ends with the expectation of waiting for the Son from heaven

(v.10). Chapter 2 ends with Paul's hope and joy and crown of rejoicing at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (v.19). Chapter 3 ends with hearts established unblameable in holiness at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (v.13). And then chapter 4 develops the teaching about that coming in full detail. Each of the first four chapters rises to a close with the Lord's coming -- it is the theme of the book.

No Longer Able to Refrain: The Intensity of Apostolic Care

The opening verse sets a tone that is the opposite of nominal or seasonal Christianity. Paul and his companions could no longer refrain themselves -- that is, could no longer hold back the intensity of their desire to know how the Thessalonians were faring. The King James 'we thought it good to be left at Athens' is somewhat weak. Darby has 'to be left alone in Athens,' and the force of the original is closer to being abandoned -- that is how the apostle felt about it. He deeply felt the loss of Timothy's company in order to send him back to Thessalonica. Athens, the intellectual capital of the world, the center of Greek learning and philosophy, a stronghold of polytheism and of human wisdom apart from God -- he was left alone there. It was not a small thing. It shows how great his exercise was concerning the brethren.

Timothy: Fellow Workman Under God -- Not Under a Human Hierarchy

Paul describes Timothy in verse 2 as 'our brother and fellow-workman under God in the glad tidings of Christ.' Darby's marginal note acknowledges some textual uncertainty -- whether the preposition is 'of God,' 'minister of God,' or 'under God' -- but in any case, the heart and conscience are directed toward God. That is the defining characteristic of this kind of service. Christian labor that directs the heart and conscience to a board of trustees, or a missionary society, or some

human hierarchy in this world, simply does not compare with the kind of service Timothy rendered. He was a fellow workman under God. That is where the authority rested and where the accountability lay.

The mission itself required courage. Timothy was walking, in a sense, into the lion's mouth. To go to Thessalonica and be publicly identified with saints who were under intense persecution was to share in that reproach. That is a service of love. The bonds of the one body expressed themselves in Timothy's willingness to go to a dangerous place for the sake of the brethren there.

Confirm and Encourage Concerning Your Faith

The two purposes of Timothy's mission are stated together in verse 2: to confirm you and encourage you concerning your faith. Both verbs govern the same object -- concerning your faith. The confirmation speaks to the content: the faith has a doctrinal substance, as Jude says, 'once for all delivered to the saints.' There is something to be confirmed. And the encouragement has to do with the outworking of that content in the life. Christian truth has a practical outflow, and saints need encouragement in working out what God has worked in. The gospel is not proclaimed and then left to sink or swim. There is a care for the sheep that God gathers through it.

That No One Be Moved by These Afflictions

The goal of Timothy's confirming and encouraging was 'that no one might be moved by these afflictions.' To be moved is not a physical displacement from one location to another, but a moral movement of the soul -- a getting away from the Lord. It is what happened to those who recanted under persecution. The danger is that the afflictions displace Christ from the center of attention, so that instead of the eyes being fixed on the Lord Jesus the suffering becomes the focus. As soon as we forget the Lord and start thinking about the reproaches and the suffering

from wicked men, the enemy has achieved his purpose in the persecution. Annie Askew, at the stake, was told a pardon was available if she would recant. Her reply: 'I did not come here to deny my Savior.' She was not moved. Others were.

Verse 3's parenthetical adds two things. First: 'ye yourselves know that we are set for this.' It is not learned knowledge, but inner subjective knowing -- you have the sense of it in your own souls. The character of the gospel is such that it cuts directly against the world and its assumptions, and the world can only respond with opposition. This is to be expected. It is a moral ordering of things. Second: Paul had already told them this beforehand. In the brief time he was with them -- perhaps three weeks -- he had covered a great deal of ground, including this. That is a commentary on what should be brought before even the newest converts without delay.

The Tempter Behind the Persecution

Verse 5 singles out the tempter behind the affliction. The same one who worked in the garden to produce defection from God's will through craft and subtlety; the same one who came to the Lord Jesus himself -- that is the one who uses persecution to attempt to move the hearts of the saints from their Lord. Paul sent Timothy to know their faith: 'lest by any means the tempter had tempted you, and our labour should be in vain.' The labor would not be in vain if the saints remained standing. That is the apostle's deepest concern -- not merely whether they had physically survived the persecution, but whether their faith stood firm.

The Any-Moment Hope and the Predicted Tribulation

An apparent difficulty arises from verse 4: Paul had told the Thessalonians beforehand that they were about to enter into tribulation -- and it came to pass. Does a predicted tribulation undermine the any-moment hope of the Lord's return? The answer is twofold.

First, the tribulation that follows conversion for those who faithfully cleave to the Lord is a moral ordering of things. It is not a specific event that must occur before the Lord can come. It is the natural and inevitable consequence of holding to a faith that the world finds obnoxious. God is faithful in not allowing His people to settle down too comfortably in this world. This was as true of the Thessalonians as it is of any believer today -- and does not mean the Lord cannot come at any moment, any more than the fact that someone got saved yesterday prevents the Lord from coming today.

Second, and more directly: the end of verse 4 says 'even as it came to pass and ye know.' The tribulation that was forecast has come. It is past. What specific thing is left to wait for? The answer in the New Testament is: the coming of the Lord. A similar case is Peter. The Lord told Peter in John 21 that he would die -- and 2 Peter 1:14 shows Peter writing 'knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle.' Peter knew he was going to die. That made him the one believer in the New Testament who could not share the any-moment hope of the rapture. But Peter has been dead for a long time. The tribulation at Thessalonica is past. The death of Peter is past. There is nothing now in the New Testament left to wait for before the Lord Jesus comes.

The New Testament does not give us a checklist of events to look for before the Lord's coming. If God had intended us to look for signs -- the Crusades, the Reformation, a world war, anything -- it would have been simple to provide such a list. The very absence of that list, and the presence instead of the persistent call to wait for the Son from heaven, is itself the testimony of Scripture on this point.

Now We Live If Ye Stand Firm: The Bonds of the One Body

Verse 8 is one of the most remarkable statements of the epistles: 'we live if ye stand firm in the Lord.' It was not merely that Paul was relieved to hear good news, in the way one might feel better after a worry has passed. His very life, his

vitality and sense of living for the Lord, was bound up with the standing of these brethren in Thessalonica. That is what the bonds of the one body mean in practice. The body is one; what one member suffers or enjoys is felt through the whole. Paul's longing after the Thessalonians, his sending Timothy at the cost of his own companionship, his joy at the report Timothy brought back -- all of this is the one body expressed in the affections of real persons in real circumstances.

Verse 5 shifts from 'we' to 'I': 'for this reason I also, no longer able to refrain myself, sent.' There was a 'we' -- Paul and his companions -- but there was also an 'I' that individualizes the care. It makes it personal. And in Philippians 2:20, Paul says he has no one like-minded who will with genuine feeling see how they get on -- for all seek their own, not the things of Jesus Christ. That is the standard against which to measure this kind of apostolic care: when all seek their own, the tempter has his opening. The remedy is the I of verse 5 -- the individual, personal, cannot-hold-back care of a man who loves the saints as his own soul.

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Lord willing.