

1Thessalonians 12-03-30a

This is Friday, the 30th of April, 2012. We are finishing chapter three in the great first letter to the Thessalonians. We'll take a moment to go to the Lord in prayer and then we'll begin.

Father, what a blessing and a privilege it is for us to lay aside the tasks and the responsibilities and the challenges of our existence in this life together with believers of like mind in the presence and power of your Holy Spirit and with the Lord Jesus in our midst and devote ourselves to improving our understanding of your word, your plan, and your purpose and your character, the expressions of your grace toward us. We're so grateful for the things that you have provided to us. We who are completely undeserving have been made worthy and been made acceptable through the Lord Jesus.

We're grateful for that, grateful for this time. And we ask that you will bless us as we seek to gain a better grasp and a firmer foothold in your plan as it pertains to us now and in the time to come. We pray that each one who has chosen to spend this time will receive a blessing and encouragement and insight truth from your word that God the Holy Spirit will be able to use to comfort and strengthen us for those things that you have called us to do.

We pray it in Jesus' name, amen. If you remember the content of chapter three of 1 Thessalonians, Paul began by saying when we could no longer endure it, we thought it'd be good to be left alone in Athens and to send Timothy. Paul could not be there in person so he sends a representative and Timothy in verse six has come to us from you and brought us good news of your faith and love.

Paul's concern as he mentions in verse two is that Timothy go and establish and encourage them concerning faith. Timothy has brought back word that constitutes good news about their faith. This is the same faith that he mentioned back in chapter one and talking about how he gives thanks in his prayers for their faith.

Now, what's going on here? What is this faith? Why is this faith so important? We've seen references to hope and how important that is. We've seen references to love and how important that is. But in this chapter, the focus seems to be on faith.

Say, well, I know what faith is. That's when I just grit my teeth and trust God when it doesn't look like I should. Well, we hope for something more specific.

What do you think? This is like a little pop quiz question here. See if you can answer it. What do you think was specifically in Paul's mind when he thought of the Thessalonians and was concerned about their faith? Thankfully, we don't really have to speculate or guess because he tells us, if you look carefully at this chapter, he says, I sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ to establish you and encourage you.

So if Paul told Timothy, look, I'd like you to go back to Thessaloniki. I'd like you to establish and encourage the believers there in their faith. So here's my next question.

Let's say that you're looking at me and you say, well, there's old Sam. I really think he needs his faith established and encouraged. What would you send me? What would you say to me? In what way would you establish my faith and encourage my faith? Or if I was gonna do the same for you, or if we heard of somebody in some far off place and we were gonna send somebody as sort of a emissary, a missionary, a spokesman, what would they do to accomplish this mission? How do you, here's the question.

How do you establish somebody else's faith? How do you encourage somebody else's faith? Because he doesn't really give the answer here. He doesn't say, I told Timothy to go and do A, B, C and D so that you would be established and encouraged. He just says, I sent Timothy to do it.

However, the answer to those questions is in this chapter. And Paul cleverly puts the answer in here without really drawing attention to it. But as I mentioned, I think last time, this chapter is a bit chiasitic.

He starts talking about Timothy and he ends with Timothy. And at least in this section, verses one through 10, but he says, we didn't want you to be shaken by your afflictions. So whatever Timothy is gonna do, it is going to help sustain them in their persecution, in the opposition that they are continuing to experience.

This would be good for you and me, wouldn't it? If we're encountering hostility, if we are being looked at askance, if we're being treated poorly because of our faith, whether individually or corporately, it would be nice to have something to sustain us through that, to keep us objective. We told you before when we were with you that we all suffer tribulation just as it happened and as you know. For this reason, for what reason? We know that you're being persecuted.

So this faith that needs establishing and encouraging is under attack due to persecution, due to affliction, due to opposition. It's being challenged, it's being tested, it's being opposed. So we're trying to live a life of faith.

What opposes and challenges and tests our faith? You say, well, not really much. I'm having a pretty easy time of it. I believe in Jesus, I believe the Bible, I believe the promises of God, God's been gracious and faithful.

I think I'm kind of in a time of relative non-challenge, non-test, have to watch out. This is the ideal assumption that the forces of darkness would like us to make, that we don't have to worry, we don't have to pay attention because we're not really under attack. This is what is known as a sneak attack.

This is a surprise attack. This is somebody coming under, stopping the river and coming under

the river gate. You remember that's how Belshazzar lost his whole scenario.

He thought they were impregnable and had this big party. And in the meantime, his water supply was being dried up and armies came into their supposedly impregnable fortress where the water was supposed to be. Faulty assumption that they were not under attack, not threatened.

Mene, mene, tekel ufarsin. Well, it is not a safe assumption to say, I think all is well. Our faith is being challenged.

It is under attack. And if you can't immediately identify where, this would be a good project. Do you seriously think that a healthy, growing, fruit producing believer is not a target on Satan's battle map? Do you seriously think that he's got something else to work on that's more important than God's best and brightest? If we're doing what we're supposed to do, if we are reflecting the glory of Jesus Christ and accomplishing God's purpose on this earth, we are a target.

And to not realize that we're under attack, to not be guarding our flank, not have our centuries posted, not be alert, not be watching and praying is to invite surprise and defeat. We are under attack. We are a target.

So I'm back to my question. Where is our faith being challenged? Where is it being tested? Well, we have many examples, but let's look at our chapter. What does Paul say here? When I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you and our labor might be in vain.

Paul's labors could still be in vain if the content of these letters doesn't inform us, doesn't warn us, doesn't alert us, doesn't motivate us to be on our toes and on our guard. So whatever this challenge is, the tempter is behind it. Why would the tempter be behind it? Because we are a strategic problem for him.

Paul says in verse six, but now that Timothy has come to us from you and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us. Now, what was one of the ploys that we've already seen in this letter that Satan was using to attack the Thessalonian believers? He tried to drive a wedge between Paul and them. The attacks on Paul's motives, the attacks on his teaching, the attacks with innuendo saying that he was preaching for money and so on by the enemy were designed to undermine his credibility.

What Paul says can't be trusted. What Paul says does not apply. And he's mentioned earlier that we wanted to come to you, but Satan hindered us.

So Satan had a two-pronged attack. Satan tries to keep Paul away from the Thessalonian believers, apparently successfully so. And Paul says, I was afraid the tempter would damage your faith through temptation.

Temptations from the tempter. So what's he doing? He's dividing believers who should be united.

There is Paul the apostle with golden truth inspired truth from God for them and Satan trying to drive a wedge.

Paul is going to address this same thing in a different way in Corinthians when he says, I hear that there are wars and divisions among you. It should not be so. Is Christ divided? He's not.

All things are yours. Don't let the enemy divide you. He can divide couples.

He can divide families. He can divide churches. It's his favorite tactic.

Get people worked up over a peripheral issue, get them distracted by that issue and split them up. Split them up. Get them involved in something that will defile them, that will corrupt them, that will distract them, that will deflect them, that will occupy their thinking instead of God's truth, God's plan, God's purpose.

So Paul talks about this. Timothy has come and brought us good news of your faith and love and that you always have good remembrance of us. Paul is relieved that they still have a good opinion of him.

Why? He just doesn't want to be ill thought of? No, because if the tempter, i.e. the synagogue leaders had successfully driven that wedge and they did not have a good opinion of Paul, what's going to happen? The teaching that he did falls to the ground. The credibility of the message to the recipients brought by the messenger has all been interrupted. We talked about that threefold equation.

You've got the messenger, the message, and the messagees, the recipients. Satan would love to interrupt that at any point because that revelation from faith to faith is from God's throne to our hearts and it needs to be uninterrupted and unimpeded and unencumbered. So he is relieved that they have a good remembrance because he knows that this means they still respect the teaching.

They still have a grasp of the truth that he imparted to them. Plus, he was able to send Timothy with additional truth. I began by asking the question, how do you establish someone else in their faith? How do you encourage someone else in their faith? Well, one of the ways you can do that is to speak the truth to them in love because our faith always has an object.

If you want to encourage someone's faith, give them some fresh stuff to aim their faith at, something that is from God, something that is real and meaningful. We encourage one another unto love and good works. We share songs and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in our hearts.

Why? Why? Because this freshens the targets for our faith. Faith isn't an abstract, it is a process. It is looking at a truth and believing it to be so, treating it as real in the absence of evidence of a

tangible sort.

And sometimes it's easy for us to be distracted. How many times you've ever been traveling and you would have missed a site except that someone says, look over there. Many times when we're driving up to Oklahoma, one or the other of us will look out a window and there's a beautiful sunset or there's a beautiful sky, beautiful cloud configuration.

There's pasture below and just a thing that defies description. It's so much better than any painting or any picture, but you got your eyes on the road, you're checking the odometer, trying to figure out where are you gonna stop for gas and somebody says, wow, look over there. And because someone else has seen it and appreciated it and they draw your attention to it, you can see it and appreciate it.

They didn't create it, they're not responsible for it, but they saw it and they drew your attention to it. This is what we do for each other. Now, what I'm saying here is moving toward a point of conclusion in this section of the chapter, so don't miss it.

This is something we can do for one another. It is a benefit of fellowship. It's the reason we try to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together as the habit of some is because we can encourage and we can help establish each other's faith.

Nobody can notice everything, but the more of us there are looking, the more fully we can appreciate and the more of us can see more things. So this is something, it's one of the blessings of a fellowship. You might momentarily forget, oh, you know, there's a pretty good example of that in scripture or well, God is in his heaven.

I really don't have to worry. Here's somebody with an issue, a problem, and it doesn't seem to have a solution, but I know that God loves them. I know that God is looking out for them, that if they've suffered a setback or a challenge, God is gonna work that together for good because I know they're a faithful believer and I'm praying for them and I know God is hearing my prayers and I gain peace.

I have stability. I have focus. I have objectivity in my prayer and this is something I can share with others and others can share with me.

We encourage and establish each other in the faith. This is why Paul sends Timothy. So he says, we also have a desire to see you.

Therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress, notice Paul said, I was worried about you in your affliction, your persecution. So I sent Timothy to establish and comfort you. Now Paul says, he has done the same for me.

Hear me now. Timothy, look at the ministry Timothy has. Paul sends him and he provides comfort and encouragement and strength to the people in Thessalonica.

When he comes back on the return trip, he does the same thing for Paul and his team. This is Timothy's gift. This is Timothy's ministry.

All he's done is convey the well wishes and the content of thought and the concern that Paul has for these people. He's visited them. He's gotten a good report from them.

He comes back and when he delivers this news to Paul, Paul says, in our affliction and our distress, we were comforted concerning you by your faith. You say, I go to Bible class and I'm not robbing any banks or clubbing anybody as they walk by my house. I don't run out there and hit them with a baseball bat.

So I've got an okay spiritual life, but I just don't see where I'm bearing any fruit. I don't see where God is using me. I don't know what my gift is.

Listen, just the example of your steadiness, the example of your consistency, the example of your enthusiasm for the things of God can be a great comfort and encouragement to others. Timothy just comes and tells Paul about these things. He goes and tells the Thessalonians about Paul and Silas and his own care and concern.

And it is a blessing. Paul says, in our affliction and distress, we were comforted by your faith. You would think, well, you know, my faith's for me.

I'll decide where my fate lies. My choices will determine my inheritance and my distance from the throne and my position in the white horse brigade that returns with the Lord Jesus. And, you know, my faith is gonna have a big effect on me, but we sometimes forget that our faith can have a very beneficial use and effect in God's plan and purpose on others.

He didn't say your works. He didn't say your ministry. He didn't say your protestations and conversations.

And he said, it's just your faith. Your faith comforted us in our affliction and our distress, just knowing that you all are sticking with it. Well, people can tell you're sticking with it just by looking.

And you say, I don't think I'm really a blessing to anybody. I don't seem to be doing anything in particular. Don't have to.

This is the great thing about being a believer. Just being there can be a blessing. Leave it to God.

We do what we're supposed to do. God will figure out how we will be employed. And there are many of us that will never know till we get to glory the unseen, unheralded, unknown ways that we made a huge difference.

I've given you examples from my own life in the past, and I'm sure you can think of some as well.

There are people that have been a blessing to me that will never know. They've never heard me.

I've told you some of their names, but they don't know. They won't know till the Lord comes back. But they have had a profound and lasting, beneficial, encouraging, establishing effect on me.

That some of you are in that group, and you don't know specifically what it is about you or what the nature of the blessing is, but it has been a great and lasting blessing to me. And this is part of your usefulness in God's plan and purpose. Don't discount it.

Don't sell the Lord short that he hasn't figured out a way to use you. Just continue to be faithful. Just continue to stick with it.

These Thessalonians wouldn't have known what a blessing they were to Paul, except that Paul wrote this letter and sent it back to them. The blessing would have been the same whether they knew it or not, right? Well, same with us. You don't know how God is using you.

And it isn't our knowledge that counts. It's the Lord's plan and purpose. So we were comforted concerning you by your faith.

Not by your gift, not by your ministry, not by your presence, not by anything else you did, just hearing of your faith. Great encouragement. For now we live, Paul says.

Some of the translations can't quite wrap their mind around this idea. And so they'll throw in an italicized word, a new American standard or one of these says, now we really live because we've heard of you. What's Paul saying? This is our life.

We are alive. We are living. What's he saying? Would his heart have stopped if he had gotten bad news from Thessalonica? Probably not.

But he says this, what does he mean when he says, we live if you stand fast in the Lord? What kind of life is he talking about? Physical life? Heart's gonna stop if they don't do well? No. Spiritual life, gonna lose his salvation if the Thessalonians don't stick with it? No. What kind of life is he talking about here? Quality of life? Are quality of life's gonna go in the handbasket if you all fall off the wagon? No.

What kind of life is he talking about? This is productivity life. My rose bush is alive and it blooms. My fruit tree is alive and it bears fruit.

This branch is alive and there are green leaves coming out of it. Look at those buds. Look at those nascent, soon to be visible little green things that are just on the nubs and on the edges right now.

But I'm not gonna break that branch off. I can see it's alive because look at what it is producing. Paul says, we have evidence of the life of our ministry, of the fruitfulness of our efforts in you.

When your faith persists, it vindicates, it evidences the life of Paul's ministry, the fruitfulness of his efforts for the Lord. And this is an encouragement. It's great to see that something you do makes a difference in God's plan and purpose.

You are useful to the master. It's a wonderful encouragement, right? That's what he's saying. We live.

It's proof that we are not a dead branch so long as you stand fast in the Lord. Because they wouldn't be a group of believers with knowledge of God if it weren't for Paul. And as long as they last, they're evidence that what he taught them was correct.

And his testimony to them about the Lord Jesus and about the church age and everything else is vindicated in the fact that they are themselves producing fruit. For what thanks, verse nine, can we render to God for you for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sakes before our God. Now look, Paul is in Athens, right? He's alone, he's busy, he's looking ahead, he's planning his next trip, writing his next letter, doing things.

People are back in Thessalonica that he hasn't seen in months now, but they can still be a tremendous source of joy and rejoicing. Look at what he says. How can we possibly thank God enough for the joy, for the gratification, for the happiness that we feel for your sakes before God.

Now, what's he looking at? Night and day, praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith. I just got through saying, I got such a great report on your faith. I'm all cheered up.

This is great. I'm encouraged. We're enduring persecution.

We've got joy and rejoicing. Can't thank God enough. And I still can't wait to see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith.

Well, is this a contradiction? If they're doing so great in faith, why would there be anything lacking? Well, this is an interesting set of Greek words here. And if you look at the wording, some of you, especially if you remember a little bit of Greek, might be tempted to think you know what these words are. For example, perfect what is lacking.

Well, you might think, well, that's going to be plairo, to fill up what is lacking. The glass is two thirds full. We're going to fill it the rest of the way up.

We're going to complete it. Or to finish something. Remember, tetelestai, from telaio, to complete, to finish.

Jesus said, it is finished. Tetelestai, the double T at the beginning, that's the perfect tense. It has been finished, is what he literally said.

Otherwise, it would have just been some version of telaio. But it's tetelaio. And that doubled prefix thing, that's the sign of the perfect.

It has been finished, with the result that it remains finished forever, is how they like to say it. But this isn't telaio. It isn't plairao.

This is a very interesting word because perfect here, is the word katartizo, katartizo. And katartizo means to complete a thing. It is something that has been made suitable, something that has been made, and it can be used of repairing a thing, restoring to full function and use.

It isn't that it was missing something, but maybe it needed refurbishment. Maybe it needed replenishment. Maybe it needed shining up.

Maybe it needed lubrication. Maybe it needed unsticking, or redirecting, or whatever it may be. But this is restoring a thing to full operation and function, so that it is now right.

It is faultless. It is meeting whatever demand is placed on it. So it doesn't imply that there was necessarily something, lacking isn't a very good word.

But this is to make fully functional, or bring to its optimum performance, your faith. This is how I would colloquially translate this. We would like to see your face.

And when it says to katartizo what is lacking, it basically means to optimize anything that isn't optimum, to bring to full potential anything that isn't quite there yet. He's not saying that there's something wrong with him. He's just saying, if I could be with you, we could really push this thing to the limit.

We could get the maximum possible speed out of your car, if I could just be there to tune it up a little. Perfect what is lacking in your faith. And he's back to faith.

He's got some more things he could tell them that would give them additional promises, additional hope, additional encouragement, additional knowledge of God's plan and purpose that would just give them that much more momentum. Now, look at verse 11 through 13. Now may our God and father himself and our Lord Jesus Christ direct our way to you.

Why? He just told us. Because there's some more things I could share with you that would just give that much more power and effect to your faith. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all just as we do to you so that.

Why is it important for there to be love between the brethren? Why does Paul ask that the Lord will make them increase and abound in love toward one another and toward those who are outside? There's a purpose in it. It isn't just all you need is love. Love makes the world go round, and all the other truisms about love.

Love in the Christian life has a purpose. Did you catch that? Love in the Christian life has a purpose. May the Lord make you increase and abound in love, verse 13, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in sanctification, holiness, before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his sanctified ones.

Look at it again. May the Lord make you increase and abound in love so that he may establish your hearts, prove your hearts, demonstrate your hearts, blameless in holiness before the Father at the coming of Christ with his, parentheses, other holy ones. In other words, when the Lord Jesus has his appearance with sanctified ones, when the saints go marching in, oh Lord, how I long to be in that number.

Well, this tells us how. How can you be one of the saints that are established as holy before the Father at the coming of Christ? It's right here. This is the formula.

This is the secret. This is how to do it. To have your heart increase and abound in love toward one another and toward all.

Can we measure this? Can we evaluate it? Can we see how love is working in our lives? Of course we can. How much of a benefit am I? How much of a pain in the posterior am I? Am I an encouragement or am I a hindrance? Am I a benefit or am I a burden? Am I someone who is able to put up with or am I someone up with others must put? You'll have to play that back and get the full effect. Love is a hindrance.

Love is the measure of how our faith and our hope are operating. Love will be the measure at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, there is something in this verse 13 that I had never seen before that you don't see right now looking at it.

But when we come back from the break, I'm going to offer to you. It's a very fascinating fact about this statement. This statement doesn't say what you think it says.

It doesn't say what I thought it said before I studied it for this class. But we'll find out exactly what it says. And this directly pertains to what's going to happen to you and to me when the Lord Jesus comes back.

And it's important that we see it. So we'll see it as soon as we come back.