

## 8] Great Joy in the Midst of Affliction and Distress (Sunday, January 10, 2021)

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**Scripture:** Psalm 133; 1 Thess. 3:1-5

### INTRODUCTION

I stated last week, we don't want to downplay the spiritual battles we face and the changes we are seeing in our nation.

It is horrible.

We might describe it as the final stages of a long legal and political revolution.

Thrown into the mix is the confusion and problems caused by COVID and the tyrannical responses of many local and state governments.

So, there is much that causes serious concern in our nation not even to mention that trials that we might be facing as families and as a local church.

Where would we be without God's abundant grace? Where would we be without the direction of Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit?

There is a real, deep joy knowing that through all of this mess and danger, God is still at work. And we still have a great calling in terms of the gospel and seeking the advancement of His kingdom.

**There is great joy even in the midst of affliction and distress when we stand fast in the Lord and seek to serve Him.**

We will focus our attention on 1 Thess. 3:6-10 after a brief review of where we are in this book and some of the background that we have in Acts.

## 1] BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

I mentioned some of this background last week, but it is good to keep these details in mind.

After Paul and his team left Thessalonica, they went to the city of Berea.

The ministry in Berea was fruitful, but eventually the situation there also became dangerous.

Paul travelled alone to Athens, while Silas and Timothy remained in Berea.

They were requested by Paul to join him in Athens as soon as possible.

While Paul waited for their arrival, we have in Acts 17 a description of his speech on what is called Mars Hill or the Areopagus.

We don't know precisely when, but Silas and Timothy did join Paul in Athens.

Because of their great love for the churches in Macedonia, it was determined that Timothy and Silas return back to these churches to encourage them.

We know that Timothy was sent to Thessalonica.

We are not told specifically, but Silas likely went to Philippi and/or Berea.

Paul then travelled without them from Athens to Corinth.

Eventually both Silas and Timothy arrived and from Corinth, Paul and the others wrote the two letters to the Thessalonians.<sup>1</sup>

The ministry of Paul, Silas, and Timothy in Corinth is described briefly in Acts 18.

Let me share just one passage from Acts 18:9-11.

**Acts 18:9** Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; **10** for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 17:15-Acts 18:5; Lane T. Dennis and Wayne Grudem, eds. *The ESV Study Bible*. Accordance electronic ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008), paragraph 20433.

you; for I have many people in this city.” 11 And he continued *there* a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

Paul and the others did not stay this long in Corinth because it was easy, or they liked the view from their window.

They stayed as long as they did because of the challenges that they faced in their work and because the Lord did protect them through danger and attack.

The Lord Jesus Christ had many people in Corinth.

The summary that we have in 1 Thess. 3 of their time in Corinth is described as being filled with affliction and distress.

While in Corinth facing affliction and distress, the two letters we know as 1 and 2 Thessalonians were written.

Let’s focus now on 1 Thess. 3:6-10.

## **2] FOR NOW WE LIVE, IF YOU STAND FAST IN THE LORD, 1 THESS. 3:6-10**

I believe these verses are a good summary of the book of 1 Thessalonians.

And in these verses, we see the timing of when this first letter was written.

After Paul had already made his way to Corinth, Timothy arrived in Corinth having just come from Thessalonica.

Corinth is about 185 miles directly south of Thessalonica, but obviously a journey between the two cities would be longer by foot or by boat.

Look back to verse 5.

Paul’s deep concern was for the spiritual well-being of the Thessalonians.

Had they been able to endure the testing and temptation of the devil?

Had the labor of Paul and the others in Thessalonica all been pointless?

Timothy came and brought the best news that Paul could have heard.

The Thessalonians had passed this test. They were walking with the Lord.

They had a testimony of faith, love, and desire to again be with Paul and the others.

It is interesting that the verb translated as **brought us good news** is the verb that almost everywhere else is translated as either evangelized or preached the good news.

You could translate this literally as Timothy preached the good news or evangelized us concerning your faith and love...

So, the usage of this word is different from its common usage, but there is a connection.

The good news, the gospel, is what God has done to save sinners from their deserved judgment through the sacrifice and victory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is good news to know also that others are living in terms of the gospel message.

Often in the NT we have the combination of faith, hope, and love.

Here we just have faith and love, not that hope is less important, but it doesn't always have to be mentioned.

John Calvin wrote:

Faith and love. This form of expression should be the more carefully observed by us in proportion to the frequency with which it is made use of by Paul, for in these two words he comprehends briefly the entire sum of true piety. Hence all that aim at this twofold mark during their whole life are beyond all risk of erring: all others, however much they may torture themselves, wander miserably.

We pray and seek to grow in faith, our trust and understanding of God, His salvation, and His word.

We pray that we will demonstrate the sacrificial love and concern we are to have first for God and then to others.

The second aspect highlighted in verse 6 is that the Thessalonians had a **good remembrance** of Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

**1Th. 1:2** We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention [remembrance] of you in our prayers,

You have good memories of us.

You can appreciate the idea of bad memories, something very unpleasant and that which you don't want repeated.

This memory was not just sentimental but is connected with the gospel and its spread to others.

**1Th. 1:8** For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

Third from verse 6, Paul and his team were very happy to know that they very much were looking forward to the day when they could be together again.

When you go to the doctor for a checkup or a blood test, it is always a relief to hear good results.

Timothy delivered to Paul and others the good result of the Thessalonians' checkup.

And as we see from verse 7, in the midst of all the difficulty of the work in Corinth, these results were just what they needed to hear.

The verb **comfort** is the same verb **encourage** that is used in 3:2. I think that is important.

Timothy went to encourage them.

Paul and his team were encouraged / comforted / reassured when they heard the testimony of the Thessalonians.

Satan's schemes were not successful.

In verse 7 as we have noted, Paul speaks of affliction and distress.

This affliction and distress were connected with the work of establishing a church in the city of Corinth.

The two words speak together of all the pressure, difficulties, and suffering that they endured in their work in Corinth.

I think this section should be of great application for us and encouragement in all that we are facing.

The Greco-Roman world in which Paul lived was no more receptive to the gospel than ours.

The troubles and challenges that Paul, Silas, and Timothy faced were far greater than what we face day-to-day.

So, without minimizing what we must face, let us never be filled with despair if we are truly looking to the Lord and seeking to serve Him.

**There is comfort knowing that the Lord's work continues.**

We come next to verse 8, which I like to use as the summary verse for Thessalonians.

**For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.**

We see in this verse the special relationship that Paul and the others had with the Thessalonians, almost like they were a special test case.<sup>2</sup>

The **if** is not an expression of doubt, but there is a connection between their living and the Thessalonians standing fast.

One Greek grammar states that the syntax here expresses the idea of **uncertain but likely fulfillment**.<sup>3</sup>

It is not that we doubt God's work, but we do not have a list of all the elect nor do we know how God will work.

The verb **stand fast** is a great description of the Christian life.

The idea is to be firmly committed in conviction or belief.

You must stand fast in the Lord.

**Phil. 4:1** Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved.

**Gal. 5:1** Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

There are countless things we are uncertain about in terms of the future, how God will work, what is going to take place in our nation, etc...

Rather than focus on what is uncertain, I believe far more important is to seek that which is certain.

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<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 13 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 73.

<sup>3</sup> "The third class condition often presents the condition as *uncertain of fulfillment, but still likely*." Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: an Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 696.

Are you focused on growing in God's truth and in your service for our Lord?

Are you more concerned about things you cannot change or do anything about or the people and the work that the Lord has put before you?

This section ends with an expression of great joy and dedication in prayer.

First, verse 9.

**1Th. 3:9** ¶ For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God,

How can we thank God enough for the joy that we have because of you?

Think of something that you are blessed to be able to do well.

There is a danger that we can be filled with pride and self-admiration for the talents that God has given to us.

What was Paul's special gift?

It was the gift of planting churches and evangelizing the lost under hostile conditions.

Part of what we see here in verse 9 is that far from self-boasting or self-admiration, Paul was filled with thanksgiving and joy.

**It was not Paul's genius.**

It is joy in the Lord and joy over God's grace to others.

Isn't this a very much needed perspective?

Far too much we are self-focused and directed.

We love ourselves too much; we don't love God as we should nor do we give enough attention to the needs of others.



This testimony is given not so that we will be impressed with Paul but so that you will seek true joy in the Lord and in the work that He graciously allows you to do.

**3John 4** I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.

Verse 10 finishes the thought of verse 9 in terms of their prayer and desire to return to Thessalonica and continue to teach and instruct them.

You could translate verse 10 as, **night and day excessively begging God that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith.**

I think every believer at times struggles with the duty of prayer.

Does prayer do anything?

Why pray when God already knows?

It seems that my words are either empty or I am just going through the motions.

I think we each could come up with a long list of questions and or concerns.

We must keep in mind that prayer is an act of faith and trust in God.

Not all prayer is, of course, honoring to God.

But when you pray according to God's Will and the direction of His Word, you have assurance that it is not a waste.

It is not in vain!

**James 5:16** Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. **17** Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. **18** And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

Now I have stressed repeatedly, you and I are not Paul, Silas, or Timothy.

We are not apostles, apostettes, or even missionaries.

But be encouraged in terms of the absolute importance of prayer in seeking to serve the Lord.

Your service must not be done simply with fleshly strength and ambition.

Your work is not in vain **in the Lord**, that is when you sincerely seek the Lord and His blessing.

As I studied this text, one of the questions I had was whether this request of Paul was ever answered in terms of being able to visit the Thessalonian church again?

I could not find a great deal of information on this, but if you have a map of Paul's missionary journeys in your Bible, then you will see that it is believed that Paul on his third missionary journey did see the Thessalonians again.

Most of what we call Paul's Third Missionary journey was spent in Ephesus.

But after Ephesus, Paul did have opportunity to visit Macedonia again.<sup>4</sup>

Look at Acts 20:1-2.

**Acts 20:1** After the uproar had ceased, Paul called the disciples to *himself*, embraced *them*, and departed to go to Macedonia. **2** Now when he had **gone over that region and encouraged them with many words**, he came to Greece...

It definitely seems that a way was made for Paul to be with the very beloved churches in Macedonia including Thessalonica.

This visit would not take place for a number of years, but in God's Providence it did take place.

The end of verse 10 reads, **and perfect what is lacking in your faith.**

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<sup>4</sup> Schnabel under Phase V, indicates that Paul was again in Thessalonica based on Acts 20:1-2.

The verb translated as perfect has the meaning of **put something into proper condition**, like a trainer who adjusts parts of the body.<sup>5</sup>

The faith of the Thessalonians needed to be perfected.

This is not an insult to the Thessalonians.

The ministry of Paul, Silas, and Timothy had been cut short. Even Timothy's second visit was probably not very long.

There were important matters to still be discussed.

Think of how long it took for you to understand some of the key doctrines of the Christian faith.

Consider also how many resources and helps you have.

We have so many blessings and advantages.

It is almost certainly the case that none of the Thessalonians had their own copies of the OT.

Were some parts of the NT already in distribution?

Likely not very much.

John Calvin wrote here:

But from this we infer, that those who far surpass others are still far distant from the goal. Hence, whatever progress we may have made, let us always keep in view our *deficiencies*, (ὕστερημάτα)<sup>74</sup> that we may not be reluctant to aim at something farther.<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUSION

We don't ignore the problems we face as families, a church, or a nation.

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<sup>5</sup> BDAG, s.v. "καταρτίζω," 526.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries (Complete)*, trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), s.v. 1 Thess. 3:10.

We don't just seek to sweep everything away with just a smile.

The gospel message is not, "Don't worry be happy."

Fully recognizing the problems that we face and may well face in coming days, we pray that the Lord will enable us to stand fast.

We pray and seek the joy that comes in doing the work that the Lord has given to us.

We take seriously spiritual battles that we are already facing and we know that we have no strength in ourselves.

With your focus upon the Lord Jesus Christ, you find your confidence and joy!

**There is great joy even in the midst of affliction and distress when you stand fast in the Lord and seek to serve Him.**

**Prayer**

**Hymn 278**

**BENEDICTION – 1 CORINTHIANS 15:57-58**

But thanks *be* to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.