

Satan vs. The Word

^{2:13} And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which [Who] is at work in you believers.

¹⁴ For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews,

¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind

¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved-- so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!¹

¹⁷ But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face,

¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you-- I, Paul, again and again-- but Satan hindered us.

¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?

²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

^{3:1} Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone,

² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith,

³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.

¹ Beale translates it, "They complete throughout time their sins, and the [end-time] wrath has fully and finally come upon them."

⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.

⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

An Unforgivable Sin?

DONATUS BECAME A BISHOP in Carthage (Africa) in the fourth century, sworn in under Majorinus. Thing is, Majorinus was not the bishop of the church there, at least not until a great schism which led to some of the Christians refusing to accept the ordination of Caecilian under his consecrator: Felix of Aptunga. What was the problem? Felix had been a *traditor* during the great persecution under the wicked emperor Diocletian.

A *traditor* is kind of a like a traitor—a traitor to Christ. These were people who, as the word means, “**handed over the holy things**” in order to escape being tortured for the

Faith. Often, they would give up copies of the Holy Scripture to satisfy Rome as proof of their renunciation.² Of course, the Scripture was the most prized of all holy things a Christian could own as they had to be hand copied, were very hard to obtain, and often there was only one or two copies in a given location. This is what Felix had done and the Christians at Carthage were furious that he would be retained as a bishop of a Christian church.

They were so angry that they appointed their own bishop in his place under the reasoning that, as one historian writes, “the failure to remain true during the persecution invalidated the power of Felix to ordain because he had thus committed an unpardonable sin.”³ In other words, Felix wasn't actually a Christian and therefore had no power to ordain anyone. What started as a good thing, the idea of wanting a pure church, became a massive point of conflict, and got to the point that the Donatists eventually came to believe in good cultic fashion that they were the only true Church.

² See Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, second ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 127-128.

³ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, third ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 101.

It is not the controversy Donatism itself which I want to focus on today. This takes us far afield of our text. But the basic idea of **the seriousness with which someone professing Christ** only to turn against him in times of intense persecution, this is exactly the focus of our text.

I've decided to take **1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5** as a single unit for our study. It begins with **thanksgiving** that these Christians has accepted and trusted in the Word of God (**2:13**). This is followed by picking up the theme of **suffering** that began in the first chapter (**14**), but with the focus now of Paul (**18**) explaining his great burden to know what had happened to them since he was himself forced to leave the city because of persecution (**15, 17**), a persecution that obviously did not stop when he left (**14**). Were they going to **remain faithful**? Would they apostatized, soon forsake Christ, and give up the Faith?

This was an increasing burden because they were trying very hard to get back to that city to see them in order to help them, but **Satan** was hindering them (**18**). It got to the point that they could **"bear it no longer"** (**3:1**) and thus they sent Timothy (who must not have been viewed as a threat) to es-

establish and exhort them in their faith (2) in order to circumvent “the tempter” (that is Satan again) from destroying their faith, thus causing their work in this city to be in vain (5). That’s the summary of the passage, but it is the details where this all gets so much more interesting.

As we look at it, I want to take the perspective that what is going on here is a spiritual battle with eternal consequences. This battle begins in the first verse with the Word of God and ends in the last with the Tempter seeking to undermine it. Christ vs. Satan. This is all very much as Jesus taught in his parables. In one, “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them...” (Matt 13:3-9). In another he said, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came

up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also” (Matt 13:24-26). In one, we have **the word**. “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom...” (13:19), or “when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word...” (13:21), Jesus said. In both we have **the devil**. “... the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart” (13:19) or “The enemy who sowed them is the devil” (Matt 13:39).

As we look at the passage, we will look at it in four sections. First, the **receiving** of the word (1Th 2:13). Second, the **suffering** of the church (14-16). Third, the **hindrance** of Satan (17-20). Fourth, the **unsuccessful temptation** of the devil (3:1-5).

Receiving the Word

We begin with the most important thing, because it is foundational to everything else. This is a **thanksgiving**. “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in your believers” (1Th

2:13). Notice that this is a thanksgiving *to God*. God has done something. What has he done?

He **made his word powerful** in the midst of the Thessalonians. Specifically, they “**received the word of God.**” That is, they were **saved**. Pointing out what should be obvious, you do not thank God for something if it is the result of someone else’s doing. Many people believe that when they receive the word and believe it, that this is due to their own freewill. Since I believe in a form of freewill (we will according to our nature), I need to put that more specifically. They believe that their reception of the word is due not to God, but to themselves. Specifically, God did not predestine them to believe. They believed quite apart from that.

We’ve already seen **predestination as a bedrock** doctrine of this letter (**1Th 1:4**). Receiving the word is in fact something we do of our own minds and hearts, but it only happens *after* the word has been powerful to bring us to life, as it did Lazarus who was called out by name when he was dead. This understanding of freewill is in no way contrary to predestination; but the other is.

For now, there is something more here. There is **a contrast**. The contrast is between “**the word of men** (plural)”

and the “word of God.” There are two words. One word comes from above; its origin is heaven. The other word comes from below; its origin is earth. The heavenly word is foolish to the earthly. It smells like death; it causes people to stumble over their own pride; it seems powerless. The other brought the very creation itself into being; it creates order; it produces life.

What is this “word” of God? The ESV translates the Greek preposition *os* as “which” (“the word of God, which...”). In other words, it sees the word as a message, the gospel. The YLT on the other hand translates it as “who.” Either is possible. Some might think that the “who” would refer to “God.” But I rather think it refers to the Word. The Word is a “who.” The Word is at work. The Word is Christ.

The thing is, you can’t have the former without the latter; and the latter never saves apart from the former. Through the words, the Word is “at work” in those who believe. At work causing them to “accept” the word, to “receive” this word, to distinguish this word from all others, to desire it, to love it. If you know anything at all about human nature, you will, along with Paul, give great thanks on a constant basis to God that anyone at all hears this word. And

hear it many do, including these Thessalonian Christians. All this becomes the backbone of the rest of what we will talk about today. It is vitally important, **and we will come back to it at the end.**

Suffering: Jew and Gentile

How did the apostles know that God was at work in these people? “**For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea**” (14). The word, when it is at work, never leaves a person in the same state they were in. The Word moves people, changes people, conforms them to the image of Christ. This is the outward proof that there is inward power and change. The profession comes with power. This is what we looked at last time.

In this case, being conformed to the image of Christ comes quite literally through **sharing in his sufferings**. The Suffering Servant suffered. The Thessalonians must suffer. And as we will see soon enough (cf. 3:3), this suffering is itself ordained by God for them. But he begins this way. “**For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and**

the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind” (14-15).

Here Paul remembers especially the church in [Jerusalem](#). Do you recall when the Apostles were thrown in prison ([Acts 5](#)), when Stephen was murdered ([Acts 7](#)), and when all out persecution broke out in Jerusalem ([Acts 8:1](#))? This took place, Luke tells us, at the hands of none other than this same man who is writing this letter now. “[And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria...](#)” ([Acts 8:1](#)).

Now, Saul—who would become Paul—was a leading Pharisee ([Php 3:5](#)). It is clear from the account of his own travel to Thessalonica that Jewish leaders around the Roman Empire shared in his hatred of Christ. In that town, “[The Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason](#)” eventually charging Paul and Silas with sedition against the Emperor ([Acts 17:5-7](#)). These were not “noble” men, he says (11).

When Paul reminds them that they “suffered the same things from your own countrymen,” this was, sadly, first and foremost from the Jews of that Gentile town. Paul now wants to highlight just how wicked these particular men were, though it needs to be pointed out, especially here because of how bad this is, that it was not all of the Rabbis of that town for “some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks...” (Acts 17:2). This makes what he is about to say an historical truth than a racist or anti-Semitic attack.

He says here that it was the Jews who “killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets.” This is a continuation of the fulfillment of the great “woes” that Jesus pronounces upon the Pharisees in Matthew 23. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, ‘if we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you

prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah whom you murdered” (Matt 23:29-35).

Ironically, Paul who started this whole persecution thing against Christians, ends up being one of those Christians whom they go after. For “they drove us out.” This is what Luke records in Acts 16. But he is not finished. For he says that they “displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last” (1Th 2:15-16). This is where Paul gets charged by foolish people who do not understand truth with anti-Semitism. Nothing could be further from the truth, for he is himself a Jew, as is his Lord and Savior. He has been preaching to Jews, because as he says in this very letter and others, he loves them deeply.

But this statement needs a bit of explanation and perhaps illustration. The key is the language “fill up the measure of their sins.” We just saw Jesus say the same thing, “Fill up,

then, the measure of your fathers.” What does this mean? This is OT language. God told Abraham that he could not yet take the Promised Land because “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (Gen 15:16). Similarly, Daniel 8:23 teaches, “At the latter end of their kingdom, when the transgressors have reached their limit, a king of bold face, one who understands riddles, shall arise...”⁴ Beale explains, “Israel was completing the prophesied sins that its ancestors had begun to commit and for which Jesus’ generation of Jews would receive a climactic punishment,”⁵ and suggests that this goes all the way back to their rejection of him in Isaiah 6 when God refuses to let the people repent (which coincidentally fits exactly with Jesus use of this parable in Matthew 13, which we saw is related to what Paul is saying), thus showing even more how gracious it is when anyone receives the word.

How do we think about the “wrath coming upon them at last,” though? It is probably best to see it as a kind of already/not-yet where, “The wrath has been *inaugurated* as a

⁴ This was a Jewish belief found in Maccabees, “For not as with other nations, whom the Lord patiently forebears to punish, till they have come to the fulness of their sins, so deals he with us” (2Macc 6:14; cf. Wis 19:4).

⁵ G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 84.

past event [especially in the ministry of Jesus] resulting [ultimately] in Jesus' death and the subsequent persecution of his servants [the church] ... which would be consummated by the eternal punishment at the end of the age" but which in the here and now is executed in the majority of the nation's "blinding judgment" as well as the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.⁶

How serious is their hardening and sin? I said an illustration of this might be helpful. I learned of one this past week and it has to do with certain often noticed but highly important textual variants between the Masoretic text and the LXX.⁷ Now, most textual variants are completely harmless, a misreading of a consonant or something. But not here. I was watching a video where the speaker pointed out a discrepancy in the ages of Noah's children. In each case, a hundred years was dropped off the text in the Masoretic text, which is the received text of the rabbis in Hebrew, the earliest full copy of which we have dating only to around 1,000

⁶ G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 87.

⁷ I found this watching a video called "Were the Pyramids Built Before the Flood? (Masoretic Text vs. Original Hebrew)," uploaded by Nathan Hoffman (NathanH83) (May 28, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VI1yRTC6kGE>.

A.D. The LXX, Samaritan Pentateuch, and Josephus all have the added hundred years.

| Sons of Shem In Gen 11:13-25 | Heb. Masoretic | Greek LXX | Samari- tan Pent. | Josephus |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------------|----------|
| Arphaxad | 35 | 135 | 135 | 135 |
| Shelah | 30 | 130 | 130 | 130 |
| Eber | 34 | 134 | 134 | 134 |
| Peleg | 30 | 130 | 130 | 130 |
| Reu | 32 | 132 | 132 | 132 |
| Serug | 30 | 130 | 130 | 130 |
| Nahor | 29 | 79 | 79 | ? |

In trying to think of an explanation, it seems that this had to be deliberate, for this happened in not one verse, but well over half a dozen times. So why? It may have to do with, of all things, Melchizedek. We learn in Psalms and Hebrews that Christ is a priest after the order of Melchizedek. This means his genealogy is not Levitical, but superior to it, without father or mother, eternal. But a tradition arose at some point among the [Jews](#) that [Melchizedek was actually Shem](#), son of Noah and his wife. If you have the extra 600+ years in the genealogy, this is impossible, because Shem would have died hundreds of years prior to the Abraham-Melchizedek story. But if you drop off those hundreds of

years, suddenly Shem is living into the times of Abraham, and presto! Now Melchizedek is in the same line as Levi, and there is nothing remarkable, let alone supernatural about Jesus' priesthood.

Another variant is well known from **Deuteronomy 32:8**. The variant reads, “sons of Israel” in the Masoretic text, but “sons of God” in the LXX and Dead Sea Scrolls. Why? The tradition was that there were “seventy” sons of God, heavenly beings that ruled the nations. You find it in Canaanite religion and you find it even in Exodus 15 with the seventy palms of Elim (gods). But in **Exodus 1:5** you have “seventy” sons of Jacob going down into Egypt, meaning that perhaps these “sons of God” were actually sons of Israel (i.e. Jacob). The problem is, the LXX and Stephen the Martyr (**Acts 7:14**) and the Dead Sea Scrolls all read seventy-five. Why the difference?

Again, it seems it may have something to do with Jesus, in both of these cases. If Jesus is the son of God, and sons of God are heavenly beings, then if you can de-supernaturalize the text, you take away a key apologetic that Jesus is divine. What better way to do it than with numbers that no one cares about anyway? Then, you can just reinterpret (rather

than copy) the original “sons of God” to say “Israel” and presto, Jesus can’t use a text like this to prove his deity from the OT.

These variants undoubtedly occurred [after 70 A.D.](#), for we do not have records of the “sons of Israel” or “seventy sons of Jacob” prior to that time.⁸ It would seem that even with the destruction of their temple and city, which Jesus had even predicted, that they only doubled-down in their efforts to eradicate his Name, which fits their hostility found in the NT and even what they did within their own ranks as they eliminated a Godhead from their own theology.⁹ This is the definition of wickedness, and the continuation of the same thing Jesus said they were doing in murdering the prophets and himself and his apostles, and the continuing fulfillment of our passage here in Thessalonians about these Jews. Only now, they would even murder their own sacred text to do it. And Judaism has never been the same since.

⁸ Heiser notes that later revisions of the LXX (Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion) all have “sons of Israel, but these are all post-70 A.D. See Michael S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” *BibSac* 158 (Jan-Mar 2001): 52-53 [52-74]. As for the “seventy,” this is found only in the Masoretic and Samaritan Pentateuch, but not the Scrolls (4QExod^b 4QGen-Exod^a) or the oldest copies of the LXX or Acts 7. Strangely, Heiser (54 n. 9) says that the “70” reading is to be preferred on the Exodus 1:5 passage, but offers no reason. See Martin Abegg Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English* (New York: HarperOne, 1999), Ex 1:5.

⁹ See Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven* (Boston: Brill, 2002).

What better language could you use than to say that “wrath has come upon them at last?” when they have made it so that millions of Jews can no longer come to Christ through their own Scriptures as happened since the time in the first century?

Hindrance of Satan

Well, with **the seriousness** of what these Christians—Gentile and Jew—have undergone in Thessalonica, and **the identity** suffering for Christ gives them as Christians for undergoing it made plain, Paul next explains to them in terms that are almost over-the-top how very much he and the others tried to get back there. “**We were torn away from you, brothers**” (1Th 2:17). In other words, it was not our doing. We were ripped apart, like a cloth being violently torn in two.

What was the nature of this rending? It says, “**... for a short time**” (literally, “**for the space of an hour**”). In other words, this was a very quick, unexpected, sudden departure. The kind that didn’t even allow them to say goodbye to one another.

But it was only “in person not in heart.” In other words, you need to know that though we were no longer physically present, our thoughts and prayers and emotions never left that place, for a quick a violent departure like this only leaves a sour taste in the mouth, especially when the people were so dear.

Since this happened, “we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again...” (17-18). He is making a rhetorical point, in case anyone was thinking or spreading rumors that they didn’t care but left just like all the other charlatans do. No! God forbid!

He uses spiritual treasures and bonding language now. “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy” (19-20). They have already been called children. Beale notes here that the language of “being torn” is that of being orphaned. When they converted. Now, it is of a precious treasure. Because this was God’s work in them even as it was God’s work in their own conversions, this like blood brothers.

But take note of this, especially when you pray for people to be saved, but do not do what it takes to press salvation upon them personally. These Apostles **told the gospel to these people**. Someone asked recently, “How do you tell the gospel to someone if you believe in election?” The question seems to assume that you shouldn’t, because God will just save whom he will save.

Paul believed in election, but he confronted these people with life and death. They put the choice to them. “**Will you trust in Christ? Why not? Yes, look at how he is the fulfillment of the ages. Look at how he has fulfilled Scripture. Look. Believe. You won’t believe? Why not? You must. You must do so now.**” You see, though the Apostle knows conversion is God’s work, he equally knows that telling them the gospel and pleading with them to believe is his work. And thus, when they convert, they literally become Paul’s crown of boasting before Christ. “**Lord Jesus, do you not see? I have suffered here in this city and told them the gospel and would not stop and until your elect have come to faith in you!**” This is what Paul here says that he will say to Christ on the Day of his Coming. He must boast before the Lord at his coming.

“**At his coming**” is language related to the earlier “**wrath has come upon them**” and because of the “**measure of their sins**.” How are they related? This is eschatological language. One of heaven. The other of hell. One of salvation. The other of judgment. And as I think most of you know, this book and the next will quickly turn to rather lengthy discussions of eschatology. Obviously, as we see even here, the coming of Christ was something he spent the short amount of time that he had with this people telling them all about. The time was short. They had to believe now. Christ is going to return.

“**But Satan hindered**” (18). Not that Satan hindered him telling them about these things. But that **Satan hindered their returning** to Thessalonica. It is fascinating to think about how Acts says that their original coming to this place was completely in the sovereign hand of God. They tried to go east, the Spirit wouldn’t let them. They tried to go north, the Spirit stopped them. As they went west, they came to these cities and were almost martyred. They had to leave, but as much as they wanted to return, Satan hindered them.

How are we to think about this? **Not by giving up the sovereignty of God**, as if somehow God had decreed one

thing, but Satan overrode that decree. We are not dualists; Satan is not God's equal. But on the other hand, **not by giving up the real personhood of Satan**. Satan is a real being, and his represents other real beings in the spiritual world that affect things in this one. But only at the providential permission of God.

Satan did not want the Apostles anywhere near Thessalonica. So, he hindered them. How he did this? We are not told. Perhaps a missed boat, or a delayed stay, or too much trouble in Corinth to leave, or Jewish spies like the eye of Saruman following them everywhere, or the clear and present danger that was obviously not being relieved in this city so that if they returned they would be killed. Whatever the reason(s), Paul believes Satan was behind it. But why? For that, we need to keep on reading into the next chapter.

Unsuccessful Temptation

To me, it is unfortunate that there is a chapter break here. For it seems to me that **the “devil” language** which begins in **1Th 2:18** does not wrap up until **3:5** at the earliest. Let's make our way to that verse by noting what our band

of disciples decides to do about the problem. “Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s coworker in the gospel of Christ...” (3:1-2a).

We will see the identical language “we could bear it no longer” in our last verse today, and



it marks a nice inclusio that helps us interpret the passage. But first, let’s return to Acts. When they were run out of Thessalonica, they high-tailed it over to Berea, a city a few miles

west. After staying there a while, we learn, “the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed” (Acts 17:14-15). It is at this point that Paul’s famous speech to the Athenians takes place. They stay there a while, but their thoughts have never really left Thessalonica. So, they decide to send Timothy back there by himself to see what he can do without them.

What was he sent to do? First, “**To establish and exhort you in your faith**” (1Th 3:2b). Three weeks is hardly enough to even begin to plant a group of new believers in the basics of the faith. So, Timothy’s job was to continue to establish these baby Christians. This meant **giving them basic theological doctrine**, basic **ethical instruction**, basic **hermeneutical principles**—especially understanding Christ in all Scripture.

Unlike what many today think, his job was **not to invent clever new teachings** that hipster Greeks of the day would enjoy. This wasn’t about contextual theological relevance catering to a deviant society. Rather, his job is to “**build upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone**” (Eph 2:20; see 1Co 3:10-12), according as it will say in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, “**to the traditions that you were taught by us**,” as a “**steward**” (Tit 1:7), “**entrusted**” with the gospel by others (see 1Th 2:4). This is what people need, you see. Maybe not what they want, but what they need. For this word alone—the word of God—is the only word capable of saving and sanctifying and establishing and rooting Christians at any time in any culture in any place in the world.

He was not only to establish them, but to “**exhort them in their faith**” (3:2). Exhorting is a form of **commanding while encouraging**. It is both an art and a science. He was to figure out what buttons these people needed pushed to help them in their faith, while making sure that they understood that this was not his personal opinions, but the very word of God (I am going back to the beginning of our text here, drawing upon what Paul has just told them about what and how they received what they received at the beginning. That is important!).

The word “faith” here seems to be doing double-duty. On one hand, Timothy was to establish and exhort them in, “**The Faith once for all entrusted to the saints**” (Jude 3). This is not any old faith, but the Christian Faith, the body of teaching that defines what it means to be Christian. This Faith is objective and belongs to the entire community. But when they receive it, they receive it **by faith** (1Th 1:3, 8). That is, they believe it and hope and delight in it. This is subjective, person specific and belongs to the individual. By it, they are saved. As they claimed to be believers, Timothy’s job here was not to turn the church into an evangelism center where he might reach more “seekers,” but to teach and

disciple the professing Christians, to wash them with the word, to sanctify them in the truth.

What comes next returns us to the theme of suffering, and it is very, very important. “... **exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions**” (1Th 3:3). What is the purpose of church, of teaching, of doctrine, of pastors, of sermons, of worship, of Sunday School, of fellowship, of prayer, of Christian song? It is **to ground a person** so that when bad times come they will stay the course.

He adds, “**For you yourselves know that we are destined for this**” (3). Not destined to be moved and give up the faith. But **destined to suffer afflictions**. This is what we saw when we noticed how the Spirit refused to let the missionary band go east or north but only west. In taking them to Phillipi and Thessalonica and Berea, the Spirit was leading them directly into the hand of suffering. This was God’s will. The word used here is strong: “destined” or “appointed” (*keimai*). This is not mindless fate or retributive karma. It is the deliberate plan and will of a Good and Holy God who chooses this to be the means of testing and refining of his saints as he conforms them to the image of his son.

Then the Apostle notes something personal. “For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know” (4). It is quite probable that they are thinking here of the words of Jesus that we have already seen today, where he predicts that **the Pharisees** will persecute those he sends after him in order to cause the full number of their sins to come to completion that the nation might be handed over for great judgment (**Matt 23:29-35**). Much of the first part of this letter, including here, is reminding them of what they already know. These men have suffered greatly, and yet they have still tried all in their power to get back to this city. Therefore, they are to be trusted and their word is to be believed.

1 Thessalonians 3:5 closes out our passage today. “For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.” When you think about this statement in light of the last time he said, “**bear it no longer**,” you learn that there was in fact another reason for sending Timothy.

| | |
|--|--|
| Satan hindered us (2:18) | |
| Therefore when <u>we could bear it no longer</u> ... we sent Timothy ... to establish and exhort you in your faith ... (3:1-2) | For this reason, when <u>I could bear it no longer</u> , I sent to learn about your faith |
| | for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. (3:5) |

It was to make sure that these Christians have not apostatized. This takes us full circle to the idea that would spring up later with regard to the **Donatist** controversy. Professing believers throughout the ages have in fact renounced the faith in times of intense temptation (loss of limb or life, loss of their own or someone they love).

The Donatists solved the problem by basically saying that to do this was to commit the unforgivable sin. Of course, when you look at the unforgivable sin in Matthew, you find no hint of such a thing. There the sin is directly attributing to Satan the miracles of Jesus wrought by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus tells the Pharisees that “**Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven**” (**Matt 12:31**). In what they were doing

there was never a whiff of following Jesus even at the start. It was willful, deliberate, intentional, understood, criminal, and inexcusable because it was patently obvious that what Jesus was doing was not of Satan, but of God. R. T. France notes, “The saying about an ‘unforgivable sin’ has often been inappropriately, and sometimes disastrously, applied to contexts which have little to do with its original setting.”¹⁰ He cites, among others, John Bunyan’s personal account of his wrestling with this issue in his book *Grace Abounding*.

Bunyan was tormented with thoughts that he had committed the unforgivable sin, and he did nothing like what the Donatists were speaking of. Truly, much harm has been done through the misunderstanding of this doctrine. And if you are worried that you have maybe committed it, the very worry is proof that you haven’t. The Pharisees were not worried in the slightest about such things!

Paul does not say that they would have committed the unpardonable sin. He does say that their own labor would have proved to have been in vain, for the seed that was scattered would have ended up choked out by the temptations

¹⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 482.

of the devil. It is fascinating to me that in the two main parables where Jesus speaks in this way, both have Satan as the great enemy. Jesus is no antismiraculist!

Satan prowls around like a hungry lion, seeking whom he may devour (1Pe 5:8). Peter said that, and he would know and Satan asked if he could sift Peter like wheat (Luke 22:31). Peter in all his arrogance refused to believe it, but soon enough he denied Christ three times himself, at the moment of the Lord's greatest need. This only shows the power of Satan and his wily temptations.

The biggest temptation in each of our lives here is to take what we have heard today, last week, and the months and years we have been in Church, and somehow make it either so unimportant or irrelevant or, God forbid, flat out wrong, that our faith matters little to nothing any longer. If you could discard your faith as you would an apple core, then you are in serious trouble.

Satan is an extremely powerful being. He is **supernatural**—he doesn't play by your rules, he **knows things** you don't, has seen things you have not, and he uses it against you. He is ancient—he is **more intelligent** than you on a tangential scale, meaning it isn't even close. You think you can

outsmart him? He is a **commander of a legion** of wicked beings who disrupt, lie, curse, tempt, and deceive at every opportunity. How can you possibly stand against such a one as that?

Come full circle. “**We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, who is at work in you believers**” (1Th 2:13). Luther said it, “**One little word shall fell him**” This is how you fight. With the Word. In fact, it is more.

This is how God fights for you, for he is the Word. His word will not return to him void, it shall accomplish all for his he sends it. Is his word not like a **fire**, burning in the hearts of a man? Is it not like a **hammer**, says the Lord, shattering every exalted rock (Jer 23:29). What rock is like our Rock, sings Moses? What word is like our Word? None. This is why the beginning of our passage is so vital. It roots the end in the only thing that gives hope in the midst of such times. And hope was certain!

What is to be your response to these things? Hear the word of God today and receive it for what it truly is. Then

know that Christ has conquered the Evil One and that when he plants his word into a heart, there is nothing powerful in heaven or earth to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. This is truly a thought worthy of thanksgiving. May God be pleased to make it so for us.