
The Marks of an Enduring Church

1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:13

What does it mean to suffer affliction? What does it mean to us here in the west? What does it mean to other believers in the world?

There are two problems in approaching this text.

We may trivialize what they were going through by relating it to the banalities of the “suffering” of much of the church today.

In the rush to make this passage relevant, we may not be gripped by the need to be taught, believe and begin to assert truths *for an experience which we have not yet had*.

It is my desire to avoid both.

Situation 2:13-16

They were experiencing severe persecution comparable to that experienced by the church in Jerusalem.

Support 2:17-20

They were assured of Paul’s desire and attempts to see them because of his devotion to them.

Solution 3:1-5

They were informed as to why Timothy had come to them and what he hoped to accomplish while there.

Standing 3:6-10

They were acknowledged as having stood firm in the midst of it all as Timothy had reported to Paul.

Supplication 3:11-13

They were prayed for that they might have a maturing faith, an abounding love and a growing holiness.

Perspectives for Understanding Affliction

This church had great spiritual growth and tremendous spiritual challenges. The difficulties they faced from the outside were threatening to weaken them on the inside. Now the specifics of how they come to us may (in fact, usually are) different. But the underlying characteristics and causes are the same.

Its Characteristics

How does Paul characterize the difficulties that the church at Thessalonica faced?

In Affliction

(1:6; 3:3)

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, (1:6)

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

The word means *pressure from circumstances*. This is the destined lot of true believers. No one is exempt from the pressure and stress of affliction in the midst of difficult circumstances. Therefore we are to exult in them (Romans 5:3), endure them (Hebrews 10:33) and not lose heart when others go through them (Ephesians 3:13). We are commended as servants in the midst of them (2 Corinthians 6:4).

In Suffer(ing)

(2:14)

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,

This is the same word as is used to describe the sufferings of the Lord. It may point to doing without or suffering so as to benefit another. Paul used it to describe the sufferings of the Galatian Christians at the hands of the Judiazers. This suffering is that particularly related to the cross and the meaning of the cross.

In Persecution

(2:15)

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

The word means *driven out and rejected*. The root of the word means *to pursue, to be hunted down*. It always is that which comes at the hands of our fellow man. This is the suffering that was predicted for us by Christ, is the mark of the blessed in the kingdom (Matthew 5:10) and the proper response is to pray for those by whose hand this comes (Matthew 5:44).

In Opposition

(2:15)

This word refers to *winds that blow against us and hinder our progress*. We will always have that which is opposed to us. Jesus most often exhibited His greatest power when the winds and the seas were against them. Paul uses this word to describe his casting of his vote to bring martyrdom to Stephen. The more we are trying to make headway, the more we may find ourselves opposed.

In Hindrances

(2:18)

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

This word means *a road so broken up that it hinders our progress*. The Galatian Christians had been running the spiritual race well, but someone had hindered them (Galations 5:7). Peter says that husbands do not treat their wives as joint-heirs of God's grace will have their prayers hindered (1 Peter 3:7). We are to watch lest what happens to us keeps us from reaching the God-given goals we have set for ourselves.

It is not too much different for us today. We as Christians feel the pressure and stress of circumstances. We should be experiencing suffering as a result of sacrifice for others. We may well be opposed to the point that we are being pursued and hunted down and driven out. We find that often the way to finish what we are trying to accomplish is being broken up and impeded. The question then is, "By whom?"

Its Causes

These things are not the blind operation of “chance”. Chance cannot cause anything to happen—it is merely the mathematical probability that an event may happen. Events have causes behind them. Paul points to several specific causes behind the pressures and problems that they faced.

The Hostility of People

(2:13-16)

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 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!

The ministry of Paul and the church had come under the attack of the religious Jews. The very people who had the Word of God and the expectation of the Kingdom of God were the ones who attempted to keep the gospel from the Gentiles. They had missed the broader hope of both the Old and New Testament that all the people groups would know the Lord. As a result, the wrath of God would rest on them all the way out to the end.

We may face the hostility of unbelievers. Particularly when our evangelism confronts them with sin and judgment will this opposition come. But even worse is when we face the hostility of people who claim to believe the Bible and are religious, but are not converted. Sometimes, the hostility of our own family will be the hardest to bear.

The Work of Satan

(2:17-18; 3:5)

2:¹⁷ 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.

3:⁵ 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.

We see the malice of Satan at work as he kept Paul from returning to see them (2:17-18) and as he tempted (or tested) them to overthrow their faith.

In much the same way, we face the malice and opposition of Satan today. He will oppose and hinder and thwart our attempts at ministry and may even test the caliber of our faith. The Bible clearly teaches us that the greater God uses us by His grace for ministry, the more powerfully will Satan oppose us. It is those who are at ease in Zion who have little experience of the wiles and works of the enemy of our souls.

The Providence of God

(3:9-11)

⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you,

But we must never forget that always the hand of God carefully sifts what comes to us. Whether it is the opposition of people or the malice of Satan, God never allows us to be tempted or tested beyond our ability to endure. Prayer then is the most effective resource to understand and align ourselves with the will of God. The doctrine of God's providence is the most powerful antidote to the poison of depression and despair. It is the strongest binoculars to give us the long view so necessary to chart a right course through the thickets of our present problems. Souls will shrivel in the desert of affliction if not shaded nor nourished from this Divine cordial.

So how do we handle this kind of pressure and problem? What Divine resources are available to strengthen us to endure?

Provision for Handling Affliction

We can observe how the church of that day endured pressure and persecution. Our use of the same tools and resources will equip us to be an enduring church and people.

Word of God Accepted

(2:13)

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 is at work in you believers.

The primary resource we have is the Scripture. It is not only the source of our information, it is the very conduit of the strengthening grace of God. For it to perform its work in us, we must receive it, not as merely good advice on human terms, but as having the authority of the very Word of God. Beloved, I am convinced that many, if not most, of the weak response by Christians to problems today are the direct product of our not reading, studying, memorizing and meditating on the Bible.

Do we have an appreciation, an appetite, a desire for the Word?

More than food (John 23:12)? It is bread (Matthew 4:4), milk and meat (Hebrews 5:11-14) and even honey (Psalm 119:103).

More than money (Psalm 119)? It is more than all riches (Psalm 119:14), thousands of gold and silver (Psalm 119:72), than fine gold (Psalm 119:127) and great treasure (Psalm 119:162).

More than sleep (Psalm 119:148)?

Your ability to handle affliction in a God-honoring way will rise no higher than the level of your intake and engrafting of the Word.

Effective Models Imitated

(2:14)

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,

The church benefited from the model of other churches and individuals who had weathered the same storm. The word here points to a knowledge of the church in Judea and a self-conscious choice to follow the example they had set. Paul is able to commend this modeling because *both are implementing Biblical principles*.

We should look to models as well. I would strongly commend the reading of Christian biography for this reason. It is my conviction that we need models who are not so terribly

infected with modernity and therapy. We also can identify models from third-world churches who have thought through these issues and developed Biblical strategies to deal with them.

Coming of Christ Anticipated

(2:19-20)

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.

I want to suggest that this is not only a Divine resource, but is a Spirit given outcome of affliction. Note how Paul expresses his appreciation for and relation with, these people in the light of the *Parousia*. The coming and appearing and glory of Christ does not diminish our loving relationships with others, it rather will enhance them.

Helpful Ministry Received

(3:1-2 ,6-7)

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,

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.

As I read the Scripture, I am constantly impressed by the character of that helpful ministry exhibited by Paul and Timothy. Note in passing some particular aspects that are especially helpful to those in distress.

Strong attachment emotionally - note particularly 2:17. Paul describes his absence from them in words normally reserved for death and bereavement. Are there people with whom you worship (besides your family) from whom separation leaves the emptiness and void of death?

Deep appreciation and commitment to people - 2:20 so clearly expresses, as do other verse, Paul's amazing sense of commitment to people. Are there people in our church fellowship who are a crown to you, particularly in the light of Jesus' coming?

Full affirmation of others in ministry - Paul sent Timothy who was a brother and fellow worker in the Gospel. He had full confidence that Timothy would strengthen and encourage them (3:2). Are there people who we have great confidence in their labor together with us in ministry?

Isn't this the kind of ministry we need? When we are in deep waters, how we need people to strengthen and encourage us by the Word who truly care for us and are committed to us.

Difficult Affliction Expected

(3:3-4)

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

Let us be very clear about this: true Christians experience affliction. It ought not to surprise us. We should be ready for it. We should be preparing our responses to it before it comes. We should not be disturbed or shaken, *because we have been destined for affliction by the providence of our loving Father.*

For us in the West who know little about true persecution and affliction, to whom a hangnail is a spiritual crises, we try to make these words relevant to the low level of our spiritual living.

Firm Standing Valued

(3:8)

1 Thessalonians 3:8

⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

Standing firm in the midst of the storms of life is one of the marks of true believers. Now this is not referring to our sense of independence, nor of self-dependence nor of stoic unemotionalism. It is standing firm "in the Lord." Notice the premium Paul puts on this. The (NASB) says, "Now we really live, if you stand firm."

Standing firm is a matter of choosing by faith to accept God's evaluation of my circumstances. Beyond that, it is seeing how God is actually working in my circumstances to bring about glory to His Name and being thankful in it.

Prevailing Prayer Offered

(3:10)

¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

Here is the engine that drives it all. None of the above is possible spiritually if we are not praying and if others are not praying for us. Prayer is one of the most effective means of grace to receive God's strength and to bring our faith to maturity.

In fact, let's look at that prevailing prayer in a bit more detail.

Prayer for Growing in Affliction

(3:10-13)

Notice that Paul never prays that they be delivered from their trouble, be spared of more distress, or be relieved in their affliction. Paul's focus is not on the pressure being brought on the Christians but on the faith and love that is growing up in the Christians.

¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Its Sustaining Petitions

(v.11-12)

I am constantly amazed at what Paul prays for in the Bible. It is so important to learn that these are things we are to pray for as well.

For a Directing Providence

(v.11)

Paul simply asks God to straighten out the road to them. He is not only asking for guidance, but for assistance. He is offering up his own desires, nourished in the Word of God, and submitting them to the will of God.

For an Abounding Love

(v.12)

Why would Paul pray this for the church there?

There is a growing temptation over time for a church as a whole and her people as individuals to leave their first love. What begins in a real passion of love of Christ often stagnates into simply enduring through.

There is the very real problem of persecution and pressure and affliction causing us to become self-directed, self-centered and self-pitying. It is one of the marvels of the cross that Jesus sees his mother, her friends and John and addresses them.

There is the gripping hand of fear in affliction. And fear is cast out by a maturing (perfect) love. Love for God which commits itself to sacrificial deeds of love for others *in the very midst of affliction, persecution and pressure* is that for which we ought to pray.

There is the bitter acid of hatred, especially for those who are the cause of our persecution and affliction. We must learn to become like our heavenly Father and love our enemies.

Its Sanctifying Purpose

(v.13)

The sanctifying purpose is expressed in terms of *stability* and *holiness*. That holiness begins first as a matter of the heart and then becomes a matter of conduct emerges even from Paul's prayer. This is a holiness that will appear blameless even in the brightness of the coming of Christ.

Reflect and Respond

What kind of people become a joy and crown in the midst of persecution and affliction?

People who *pray*. Are we a praying people?

People who *study*. Are we in the Word?

People who *love*. Are we a people who are known for loving one another?

People who *serve and are served*. Are we ministering to one another?

People who *have mentors*. Have you identified models of Biblical and godly living?

People who *are looking for Jesus to return*. Do you have an expectant hope and waiting for Christ?

Loved ones, we *really* live, if you stand firm.

Notes