

## **Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World**

### **Enduring Faith 1 Thessalonians 3:1-8**

#### **Introduction**

Last Sunday we explored the importance of Christian community. The letters of the apostles to various churches in the Roman Empire model the close-knit relationships among first-century Christians. We write one another when we can't be there in person. So what we write reflects what we would say if we were together.

Think of the kind providence of God toward us in this area. *God used the limitations put on the apostles because of their travels, their imprisonments, and even their looming martyrdoms to ensure that what they were teaching everywhere in person was recorded for us who would live centuries later.*

Long after they completed their earthly lives we still benefit from the actual teaching of the apostles of the Lord Jesus. We have no reason to reinvent Christianity. We need not lose our way in a sea of human ideas and designs. We still have the breathed-out words of God delivered to us by the prophets and the apostles. That means that we can be sure

that the gospel we believe is for real. And that means that the lives we live rooted in the gospel have every reason to display the life of God powerfully at work in us so that it matches what Jesus taught and what God desires.

*We live in a world of fake news because we live in a world of human beings who are all sinners by birth and by choice. The good news of Christianity can suffer the same distortions. There are all kinds of cultural pressures to twist the faith into the image of the times.* It's important for us to understand that this is not a modern problem. It's a sin problem, a "living in a world hostile to God" problem. It was a threat in Thessalonica in the first century. It is a threat now, in every culture everywhere in this world, including our own.

This great concern to hold fast to the faith is the backdrop of Paul's heartfelt letter to the Thessalonian believers. He knows what pressures they're under to back off from the gospel the missionaries had preached to them and that they had received. Paul was practically beside himself with worry that they would succumb to the pressure. When he found out from Timothy that they were holding firm, he could hardly contain his joy. That's why he wrote this letter.

This theme of enduring faith dominates the passage we look at this morning. It is custom made for helping us hold fast to the faith in a world that tries to push us off course.

<sup>1</sup> Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, <sup>2</sup> and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, <sup>3</sup> that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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— <sup>7</sup> for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. <sup>8</sup> For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

1. Urgent Importance of Strengthening One Another's Faith (1-2)
2. Unavoidable Pressures to Move Our Faith Off Course (3-5)

### 3. Joyful Encouragement of Confirming One Another's Faith (6-8)

#### **1. Urgent Importance of Strengthening One Another's Faith (1-2)**

<sup>1</sup> Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, <sup>2</sup> and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith,

Timothy—our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ

Valuable to Paul both personally and professionally, but so urgent was the importance of knowing the Thessalonian believers were okay, that Paul was willing to be abandoned, left alone, to make sure they were okay.

He explains Timothy's mission, a cause so important that it was worth the sacrifice.

Verse 5—sent to learn (know) about your faith; in person observation

Establish—to make firm, stable; strengthen what is there to make sure it continued to hold

We all need reinforcement against the winds of opposition, deceit, intimidation

Exhort—to call alongside—to help in any way needed: comfort, exhort, defend (like a legal attorney helps a client in an adversarial court of law)

In your faith—firm reliance on the body of truth God has revealed

Remember that these are people Paul was convinced were genuine believers chosen by God. But that confidence does not make him passive. It does not mean he takes no pains to make sure they're okay and to help where he can. The reality is that *brothers and sisters you think are just fine can be struggling, drifting, overwhelmed. It's important to look out for them.*

Think of the believers you know personally.  
Now think of the ones you know best.  
The family members with whom you live.  
The coworkers you work alongside nearly every day.  
Your classmates.  
Your friends.  
Your neighbors.  
Persons in your LifeGroup or Sunday school class or some other group in the church or in the community.

*How are they faring in their Christian faith?  
Are they suffering in some way? Are they*

*under attack? Are they struggling? Are they slipping?*

*When's the last time you made any effort to know how they really are? When's the last time you intentionally encouraged them, helped them, provided some kind of support, let them know their wellbeing matters to you?*

Paul and Timothy's actions and words communicate how important strengthening one another's faith is—and that it is urgent to follow up before it is too late.

## **2. Unavoidable Pressures to Move Your Faith Off Course (3-5)**

<sup>3</sup> that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.

These verses provide clarity on why those you have confidence are genuine believers can be in trouble spiritually.

Afflictions—pressures, tribulations

None be moved by these afflictions—drawn away; that’s the way the Scriptures describe being deceived

Tempter—used only here and in Matthew 4:3, when Satan tempted Christ in the wilderness. The devil was the tempter. He’s the adversary (Satan) of God and of God’s people. He’s the accuser of the brothers. He’s the slanderer—that’s what “devil” means. He tempts believers into doing wrong, then slanders them for doing so. Even if they do right, he finds a way to make even their good works suspect. Remember how Satan treated righteous Job, accusing him of doing right only because God had prospered him. He was happy to use all kinds of calamity to get Job to turn against God.

Fear that our labor would be in vain—when you’ve poured your life into someone, seeing them walk away from the Lord is deeply painful

How did Paul equip the Thessalonians to hold up under the pressure and affliction, to stand firm against the tempter’s fiery darts and deceptive tactics to draw them away from the faith?

He started early on bracing them for the pushback. And of course, right from the beginning they experienced it. But Paul’s

words help us gain insight into the limitations and purpose of these afflictions.

Destined for this—appointed; a divine appointment (just as God governed what Satan could do with Job)

Not just necessary, but beneficial. What Satan means for evil, God is master of using for good.

*Pressure and opposition push us to develop strength, call us to practice vigilance, and teach us that the power of God is greater than that of Satan and the world.*

Paul and his fellow missionaries, along with the other apostles, regularly trained their converts to expect and to withstand the troubles that assaulted their faith.

Acts 14:22

Strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

1 Peter 1:5-7

<sup>5</sup> Who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup> In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup> so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is



tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 4:12-13

<sup>12</sup> Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

We've been blessed to live in a country where there has been great religious freedom. Half the believers in the world, however, live in regions where they regularly face serious mistreatment for their faith. Ostracization. Confiscation. Imprisonment. Torture. Death.

But we are naïve to think the war against God and His people does not exist here. It just tends to be more underhanded. *When we see signs of growing hostility to the faith, we must not value the good will to which we are accustomed so much that we cave to the slightest pressure.* That has been the common story in the last few decades. Gospel-believing Christians so value the good graces of the culture that we go to great lengths to keep it, even when it means trimming the truth. What's more troubling is how many professing Christians cast stones at their nonconformist brothers and sisters in

Christ in order to gain credibility with a culture that has redefined what goodness even means.

Long time church members and beloved pastors have become mouthpieces for the enemy, ushering others into a path of deconstruction that leads away from Christ and His gospel.

### **Applications**

- What pressures or afflictions are undermining your faith or the faith of believers you know?
- What temptations are having the effect of drawing you or others you know away from the Lord?
- Since the Scriptures say we are appointed to these afflictions and temptations, how is God using these difficulties to strengthen your faith rather than to destroy it?

### **3. Joyful Encouragement of Confirming One Another's Faith (6-8)**

<sup>6</sup> 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—

Good news—usually translated gospel or evangelizing

Faith and love—the sum total of godliness  
True, saving faith in God unfailingly produces  
loving heart and action.

Here it was marked by the Thessalonian  
believers still holding Paul and his  
companions in their minds with fondness and  
their longing to see them again. It was not a  
case of “out of sight, out of mind.”

<sup>7</sup> for this reason, brothers, in all our distress  
and affliction we have been comforted about  
you through your faith. <sup>8</sup> For now we live, if  
you are standing fast in the Lord.

Paul and his colleagues were facing distress  
and affliction, too. Some of the Jews of the  
synagogue strongly opposed them. They had  
to move their gospel efforts next door. In  
time they made a concerted effort against  
him, bringing legal charges against him  
before the proconsul of the region, Gallio. But  
Gallio through out the accusers, and Paul and  
his companions were able to stay longer.

In the middle of this mounting opposition, the  
report that the persecuted believers in  
Thessalonica were thriving gave fresh courage  
to Paul and his fellow missionaries. Their  
pains and labors were not in vain.

The Thessalonian Christians were standing fast—in contrast to stony ground believers who receive the Word with joy, but shrivel up as soon as they face the heat of affliction

Paul and his companions were comforted by the news—same word translated “exhort” in verse 2. Just as Timothy comforted and strengthened the Thessalonian believers. Their faithfulness comforted and strengthened Paul.

*Your own continued faithfulness to Christ in the face of pressure and temptation benefits not just you, but all the believers who know you, including those who have poured their lives into yours.*

Children, teens, college students—if you’ve had the privilege of parents and teachers who’ve taught you gospel truth, you can strengthen their faith by your own steadfastness in the truth. Live what you’ve been taught. Don’t wait to serve Jesus. Do it now. Not just for yourself but for everyone connected to you.

Now we live—to know the Thessalonian believers were doing well was life-giving to Paul. It infused vital energy into his ongoing gospel ministry, now in the city of Corinth, where he faced significant opposition as well. Jesus Himself had appeared at night to Paul

to encourage him that the Lord had many people that city who had not yet trusted in Jesus.

The more common way Jesus strengthens believers is through the steadfast faith of those to whom they've ministered. When people fall away, it has the opposite effect. It discourages and weakens the hands of those trying to serve Jesus.

### **Applications**

- Who are those who've contributed to your faith?
- In what ways is your walk with the Lord in the face of difficulties an encouragement to them that they have not labored in vain?
- What joy and comfort can you bring to believers who care about you?

### **Conclusion**

This earnest concern for the faith of others is from the heart of Jesus Himself.

Luke 22:31-32

<sup>31</sup> Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat,  
<sup>32</sup> but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.

What was Jesus' prayer for Peter like? Listen to His intercession for His followers, an intercession that we know from Hebrews continues to this day:

John 17:15-19

**15** I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. **16** They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. **17** Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. **18** As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. **19** And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Enduring Faith is priceless. It's worth going to all lengths to strengthen and preserve. It stands in the face of significant pressure and temptation in this world. And it is a source of great comfort, joy, and life to all those committed to advancing the gospel in the lives of others.

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Closing Song: Jesus, Draw Me Ever Nearer

## Discussion Questions

1. Who are Christian friends of yours that you know are suffering in some way?
2. What are some ways you can reach out to encourage them in the faith?
3. Why is being pressured or drawn away from the faith not just a modern problem?
4. Paul says believers are destined (appointed by God) for afflictions and temptations. We are sensitive to the negative results of such pressures, but what are some positive outcomes of enduring trouble? (Note 1 Peter 1:5-7 and 1 Peter 4:12-13.)
5. In what ways is faith the foundation of love, and love the fruit of faith?
6. Who are some of the people who've contributed to your faith in Christ?
7. In what ways would your holding fast to the faith encourage and strengthen them?
8. How does caring for the wellbeing of one another's faith mirror the heart of Jesus? (See Luke 22:31-32 and John 17:15-19.)