

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

"Appointed To Afflictions"

Paul's experience in the city of Thessalonica was *fruitful*, yet *frightful*. Fruitful in the sense that his evangelistic efforts seemed to be extremely successful. Acts 17 informs us that *some* of Jews were persuaded, & "a great multitude" of the devout Greeks, "& *not a few* of the leading women" joined Paul & Silas! There was quite simply a tremendous spiritual awakening among the inhabitants of the city! People were responding to the gospel!

However; it was *frightful* in the sense that upon seeing the success that Paul was having, the Jews who weren't persuaded, becoming envious, took some "evil men" from the marketplace, gathered a mob, set the city in an uproar & attacked the house of Jason (the place Paul presumably stayed, but he wasn't there when the mob arrived), dragged him down to the rulers of the city! They made all kinds of allegations against him, the rulers fined him, it just got super tense & they discerned that lest Paul be placed in prison or put to death, he needed to go!

But this was a difficult decision for the apostle because we read there that he'd only been there for 3 Sabbaths... Now, perhaps he was there a few days before the 1st & a few days after the 3rd, but either way, he was only in town (seemingly) for about a month or so (give or take) which really isn't much time to plant a church, root new believers & set things in order! So as one might imagine, Paul really wanted to make his way back there & pour into them & it bothered him that he couldn't be with them.

As a matter of fact, Ch 2 ends with Paul (in essence) saying, "I really want to come & see you, but because of spiritual warfare, I've been unable to." & This is the agenda of your enemy: you're seeking to advance the kingdom of God & he's seeking to undermine your work. If he can create isolation & separation, then his odds of uprooting or at least *slowing* the work if not *stopping* it altogether; increase.

So we place ourselves in the apostle's sandals. You've led a "great multitude" of people to Jesus... (What does that mean? 100, 500... over 1,000? I don't know, there were some 200,000 people in the city so...) But literally after a few weeks, you were run out of town & you haven't seen nor heard anything in the last 6 months or so... It's driving you crazy, you can't stand not knowing how the work is doing! This is where he's at.

Vs 1-3

Paul says, "I tried & tried to figure out a way to get to you personally, but when it was apparent that it wasn't going to happen & I just couldn't stand it anymore, I decided to stay in Athens alone & send to you Timothy." (It would seem that he dispatched Silas to Philippi)

In other words, it cost the apostle to check up on them & it was a price that he was well pleased to pay! Timothy wasn't simply some "wet behind the ears, second rate servant" who was perhaps capable but not really essential to Paul. To the contrary, Timothy was the very best representative of Paul, if Paul couldn't be there personally! When he wrote to the Philippians he said, *"I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state. For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus. But you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel. Therefore I hope to send him at once..."*¹ Paul was doing his very best for them in sending Timothy to them.

He calls him, "our brother" pointing to a co-equality in the ministry along w/Paul & Silas. He refers to him as a "minister of God", (not in the sense we think of a "minister" today w/respect to a dignified title of sorts, but the word really means "servant" or "worker"). In other words, Paul is pointing to the fact that this young man is in the trenches w/him, that he is (as we read here) a "fellow laborer" w/him in the context of the gospel of Christ... In other words, he's completely qualified to handle the task to which Paul committed to his trust.

& What was that work? It was 2-fold. Vs 2, it was #1 "to establish you" & #2 "encourage you concerning your faith,". They needed some fundamental, foundational discipleship & Timothy was the man who could get the job done.

Now; we might spend some time thinking about & coming up w/a number of things that we consider essential in "going the distance" or having a "fruitful existence" in Christ. But 2 things we would all agree on is that we need to be "established" (that is, made firm, strengthened or fixed) in our faith & "encouraged" (meaning to be instructed, exhorted & urged) in our faith. To realize that tough times aren't exclusive to me, & how it is I handle them when they hit! & Since Paul had only been w/them for a month or so, it stands to reason that he would want to make sure that these new believers were grounded in these areas. That they know not only *what* they believe, but *why* they believe it!

He says, "I want you to be 'established' in this." The word "establish" is the word *sterizo*, from which we get our word "steroid". A word that conjures (in our minds) the image of a man who's ripped. But that's exactly what Paul is saying.

¹ [The New King James Version](#). (1982). (Php 2:19-23). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

God wants you to be *strong* in your faith! But typically, strength is built through resistance, pressure bearing down upon you (in the gym or otherwise). That's why Paul ties this together with the reality of afflictions. The pressure that bears down upon you as a believer, God uses it to make you stronger.

Peter spoke to this same principle when he wrote, *"But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you."*² & Timothy was there to help them in their understanding of these things. To help firm up their foundation & bring them along in their understanding & application of God's word so that they would stand strong in the face of affliction.

You see, Timothy was to *establish* them; then *encourage* them, or admonish/instruct them to *be about* what they had *learned about*. As we say around here, one of the big keys to the Christian life isn't simply found in what I've *learned about*, but what am I going to *do* about it? How am I now going to *walk* in it? In what way is it making my life different?

So both of these are necessary & they're needed in this order. Established, *then* encouraged. I can really only be encouraged once I've been established in the right direction. Otherwise, I'm being urged in the *wrong* direction... So, discipleship happens in *this order*, doesn't it? #1 Established, #2 Encouraged.

Lest we be (Vs 3) "shaken" by these *afflictions* (or pressures, distresses, tribulations etc). This word, "shaken" is a very interesting word. It's actually used of a dog wagging its tail... It's also used in the context of flattery... So the idea could be (& it may point to both) that of vacillating back & forth because of tribulation (being unstable in our walk). Or it could point to the fact that though God may bring us *to* affliction (we'll talk about that in a minute), Satan tries to take advantage of it & lure us away from God *through* the affliction.

In other words, w/out a solid understanding of the place of suffering/affliction in the life of the believer, we're in grave danger of being *shaken* (unstable *in* or lured away *from*) our faith. That's why Paul says, "For you yourselves know that we were *appointed* to this." Underline that word "appointed". Now let me say this, there are certainly hardships that enter our lives due to poor decisions that we make that could be avoided altogether.

Having said that, we need to understand (taking for granted we're not living in some sort of sin or rebellion against God), afflictions aren't *accidents*, they're *appointments*.

² [The New King James Version](#). (1982). (1 Pe 5:10-11). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

God has made them for you! It doesn't mean He's angry w/you, displeased w/you, somehow punishing you, to the contrary He's proving you, strengthening you, establishing you! The goal isn't to tear you down, it's to build you up, make you strong in the Lord & in the power of *His* might.

Now; think of all the things you have to make an appointment for. You make an appointment to get your teeth cleaned, to see the Dr., to have that music lesson or take your car to the mechanic... God makes appointments for you as well (& this is one [in all honesty] we'd like to miss 😊). But we never miss the appointments God schedules for us. Because He loves us enough to give us the very best when what we really want is what's easy... But how many of us have really stopped to think about the fact that the symbol of Christianity isn't a feather bed... it's a cross.

It's something we need to understand, affliction is simply a part of following Jesus. Jesus said it like this, "*In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*"³ I've always struggled w/people who try to paint Christianity as a problem free, escape from reality, a utopian/affliction free experience in life. It's not true, the word of God defies that thought altogether. In fact, we read in the book of Hebrews, that even Jesus learned obedience by the things which He suffered (Ch 5:8). Now; what servant is above his master?

You see, if I understand that hardship/affliction doesn't necessarily indicate that God is mad at me, or there's sin in my life, or that I'm out of God's will & I just can't figure it out... But that perhaps God is teaching me perseverance, patience, obedience, how to comfort others w/that w/which I've been comforted, that He's bringing me into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings... Then rather than thinking, "I guess I just can't do this..." & walking away. I'll say, "God have *Your way through* this, be glorified in my life." & I'll be encouraged to carry on, to endure. God's no mad *at* me, He's actually at work *in* me... Making me more like Jesus & *that* I can get behind, maybe even in some strange way be excited about...

So Timothy was there to establish them in the word. Show them the place of suffering in the believer's life (he could've spoken of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David or any # of the prophets [no doubt culminating in Jesus] demonstrating how affliction worked out for their eternal good & God's eternal glory).

³ [The New King James Version](#). (1982). (Jn 16:33). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Vs 4-5

In Vs 4 Paul reiterates the fact that suffering is a normal part of the Christian experience. Gold is refined in fire. (Paul himself had been beaten, placed in prison, stoned & left for dead & more). Peter wrote, *"Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;"*⁴ We tend to be surprised when seasons of struggle are upon us, we should find ourselves rejoicing when the season of reprieve is upon us! Because if you're taking your relationship w/Jesus seriously, you genuinely have a heart to grow in godliness, your enemy will make sure you have a tough go of it. Paul later wrote, *"Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."*⁵

He had told the Thessalonians that tribulation was going to find them. That their faith would be tested, but he's anxious to learn how they're handling it. He says, "lest by some means the tempter (Satan) had tempted you, & our labor might be in vain." You see? Paul recognized that God will bring us into the refiner's fire, but Satan will try to take advantage of that & lure you away from God (cause you to give up on God) in the midst of it.

Jesus spoke about this in the parable of the sower. He said, *"But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles."*⁶

Paul was trying to prevent this by establishing/encouraging them through Timothy. & Family this is just one more reason to come together as a body, we need the help of other godly believers when we're going through the fire! When we're being afflicted, pressured, distressed... The presence of other godly people can strengthen us, establish & encourage us.

Vs 6-8

"I'm being honest" Paul says, "I was worried about you. But now that Timothy has brought us good news of your faith & love, that you always remember us in a good light, (haven't bought the lies) it renewed me, refreshed me (now I live)! It doesn't matter what happens to me now..." Guys; again, do you see how Paul wanted to comfort them in sending Timothy, but in hearing of them it comforted him? It's what fellowship is all about, this loving connection w/others.

⁴ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (1 Pe 4:12). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁵ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (2 Ti 3:12). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁶ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Mt 13:20-21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Sharing life together & being encouraged by how others are doing, there's mutual encouragement that we extend to one another. (Another reason we encourage small groups around here, get involved, encourage one another).

Vs 9-10

I'm sure Paul was concerned for how people faired practically, wanted them to do well financially, but notice his focus was on how they prospered *spiritually*. That's what really excited him.

He says, "Man, we're really praying hard that God will make a way for us to see you face to face." Why? He says, that we might "perfect what is lacking in your faith". Listen, we need to see this. Paul has repeatedly complimented them up to this point. He's spoken of their faith, hope & love. That the report of their zeal for Jesus precedes them, that they're his glory & crown of rejoicing at the Lord's coming.

Yet he says, "There's something lacking." Translation? There's still room to grow. & Paul understood that as an apostle, he could be instrumental in their growth (just as he's instrumental in our growth as we study God's word together). When we *see* Jesus we will be *like* Jesus... until then, we have room to grow. Room to mature in the faith.

Vs 11-13

Couple things before we sign off. #1 We note the prevailing place of love in this passage. Paul has already acknowledged & commended them for their great love, this was not a loveless church... But love is one of those areas that needs constant attention & purposefully pursued in our Christian lives. We should always be seeking to grow in love. Why? Because it's the essential/defining mark (quality/attribute/characteristic) of the Christian faith.

Jesus made it clear when he said, "*By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*"⁷ John went on to say, how can we say we love God whom we've not seen & hate our brother whom we have seen?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus ramped it up to another level when He said (in essence) that if we only love those who love us back, that's a small/shallow kind of love. Sure it starts in the family of God, but it needs to grow beyond that. Jesus said we're to love our enemies, even as our Father in heaven has so loved the world... So we need to grow in love to one another *& to all...*

⁷ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Jn 13:35). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Vs 13

I hope you're picking up on the theme of Christ's coming throughout this letter. Each Ch has drawn attention to the return of J.C. & Here Paul connects it to holiness & blamelessness (not sinlessness because we will contend w/our sin nature until we receive our resurrection body).

But notice it's the *heart* that's established blameless in holiness (of course holiness carries the idea of being set apart from the world, from sin/self unto God). Satan would rather you concern yourself w/outward holiness, a holy exterior all the while neglecting the interior. Like a whitewashed tomb, looking so pristine outwardly but full of death & deterioration inwardly. But when God is establishing you in holiness, it starts on the inside.

& Noting motivates us unto holiness (active obedience to the word of God, cultivating our hearts inwardly & our habits outwardly) like the fact that Jesus could return at any moment... Make your way to **Matthew 24** (We'll finish there).

Vs 45-51

"My master delays his coming" is a dangerous position to take. It encourages us to drift, to relax our standards & begin to stray... But to maintain the mentality that Jesus could return today, that cultivates holiness, a sense of urgency, a desire to be found well pleasing to the Lord.

Jesus is coming again. Let's be found ready, tending to & encouraging one another. Praying for one another, pouring into one another that we might increase & abound in love both to one another, & to all for the glory of His name.

Prayer Points:

God we thank You for the clarity of Your word. That You care for us & desire to establish & encourage us in our faith, in holiness from the heart. & May we be careful to understand that affliction, trying times aren't an indicator that You're mad at us or maybe punishing us, but that You're working in us, developing strength & stamina in our lives. Teach us to walk in holiness, ready (Jesus) for Your return.

Maybe you're not ready for the return of Christ because you've not surrendered your life to Christ. That can change right here, right now. Jesus has loved you, laid down His life *for* you & He stands ready to receive you, forgive you of all your sin. Turn from your sin, trust in Him today.

Faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted. God tries our faith, not to destroy it, but to develop it.