

Well, good morning! Good morning! How are we? Good. Good. It's so good to be with all of you this morning. I also want to say good morning to those of you joining us in our online community. We're so glad you're worshiping with us and studying God's Word with us, wherever and whenever you might be.

And if I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you yet, my name is Doug. I'm one of the pastors here and I'd love to meet you, hear a little bit of your story, and get to know you. So please don't hesitate to come up and introduce yourself after the service.

Well, if you would grab your Bibles, open them up to 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 with me. We're continuing our series, Ready & Waiting, and this morning we're going to be looking at chapter 2, starting in verse 17, through the end of chapter 3.

Back in 2009, I deployed to Afghanistan. I was serving there as a combat medic and working in the intensive care unit at Bagram Airfield. During my time there I saw some pretty terrible things. We cared for American military members, coalition forces, Afghan civilians, and even enemy combatants.

Some of my hardest moments there involved children. Innocent kids who had been tragically caught in a war they had nothing to do with.

For example, in an attempt to kill a man, the Taliban horrifically injured his two young sons, Hakimullah and Josif. Their father rushed them to us, knowing it was their best opportunity for survival. For months, I cared for Hakimullah, hoping he'd survive. I'd sit with this little five-year-old boy whose face had been so severely damaged, just trying to help him feel safe enough to fall asleep.

And there were times when, despite everything we did, I would be with a child or a service member when they didn't make it. But then there were other times when I was caring for a Taliban soldier who inflicted this sort of pain, and they'd survive.

And I'll tell you, that experience really affected me. I struggled with what I was seeing, and over time, I became angry with God. I had questions I couldn't answer, and spiritually, I wasn't in a very good place. And in that season there were Christian men who knew that I was struggling, and they pursued me. They made themselves available. They reached out to me, listened to me, and prayed for me.

They couldn't change what I was experiencing. They couldn't take away everything I had seen or answer all my angry questions about God. But God used those men to help strengthen my faith during a time when I desperately needed it. It wasn't overnight, it wasn't immediate, but they faithfully loved me and made themselves available to me.

And I wonder how many of us have experienced something similar. Maybe not in a war zone, but a season when life became incredibly difficult, when your faith was shaken, or when you began wrestling with questions you never thought you'd ask.

And maybe what you needed most in that season wasn't another sermon or another book. You just needed another believer who cared enough about your relationship with Jesus to walk alongside you.

Now the Apostle Paul understood the importance of having people who care about our faith. And in our passage this morning, we find Paul deeply concerned about a young church in Thessalonica. These Christians were suffering for their faith, and Paul had been forced to leave them behind. And he was worried. Not just because they were suffering, but because he knew what that suffering could do to their faith.

So he took action. Because he understood something that I think we all need to understand, let's look at what Paul writes, beginning in chapter 2, verse 17. (1 Thess 2:17 - 3:5).

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 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. 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.

Now, if you remember what Phil shared with us last week. Paul and his companions had brought the gospel to Thessalonica, and people were coming to faith in Jesus. But almost immediately, they encountered opposition. In fact, Acts chapter 17 tells us that things became so hostile that Paul and Silas had to leave the city under the cover of darkness.

And that meant leaving behind a young church, filled with relatively new believers, who were now facing persecution because of their faith in Christ. And Paul was deeply concerned about them.

Look again at verse 17. Paul says they were "torn away" from the Thessalonians. That's strong language. In fact that's the sort of language that would be used to describe someone who is being separated from family. And that's fitting because, just a few verses earlier, Paul described his relationship with these believers using the imagery of both a mother and a father.

So, these weren't just people Paul had preached to. They were people he loved. That he looked at as family. And because he loved them, he wanted to know how they were doing. But not just whether they were safe, but whether they were remaining faithful to Jesus.

And I really want you to notice just how concerned Paul was. In verse 18, he explains that he tried repeatedly to return to Thessalonica, but Satan hindered him. We don't know exactly what prevented him from returning, but Paul clearly understood that there was spiritual opposition to his ministry.

So what's he do? We see it in chapter 3, verses 1 and 2. Paul says that when he couldn't bear it any longer, he decided to remain in Athens and send Timothy to them. And notice why he sent him. Verse 2 says it was "to establish and exhort you in your faith."

In other words, Timothy wasn't simply being sent to check on how everyone was doing and hear how their summer was. No! His purpose was to strengthen these believers spiritually, to encourage them to remain faithful to Jesus in the midst of their suffering.

And notice how Paul describes Timothy. He's their brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ. His ministry is centered on that gospel. These believers needed help holding on to what they had received about Jesus. Paul was willing to be left alone so they could have someone there to help them. That tells us something about the kind of care he's describing. It costs us something. Sometimes strengthening someone else's faith means rearranging our week, following up when we said we would, or making time to open the Bible together when it would be easier to stay busy with our own lives.

And Paul tells us exactly why this was so important. Check out verse 5 with me. He says, "I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain."

See, Paul understood something about the Christian life. Following Jesus doesn't mean we're somehow exempt from hard things. In fact, Paul had warned the Thessalonians that suffering would be part of following Christ. And he knew that in the midst of persecution, discouragement, and suffering, Satan would love nothing more than to see these believers abandon their faith.

And that's why Paul sent Timothy. Not to remove their suffering, but to strengthen their faith so they could persevere through it.

And when Paul says they were destined for these afflictions, he's talking to Christians facing opposition for belonging to Jesus. He had prepared them for that. So when the pressure came, they didn't need to conclude that God had abandoned them or that the gospel had failed. That's where temptation can get a foothold, isn't it? We begin to think, 'If following Jesus is this hard, maybe I should just stop.' Persevering means continuing to trust him and obey him there. And when someone shares that struggle with us, we can listen carefully and help them remember what's true about Jesus, even while the difficulty remains.

And friends, I think there's something here we really need to hear. You can genuinely love Jesus, sincerely desire to follow him, and still experience seasons when your faith needs strengthening.

Remember, these are the same Thessalonians Paul praised in chapter 1 for their faith, love, and endurance. But Paul still recognized their need for encouragement. Their faith was genuine, but that didn't mean they were beyond needing someone to help them grow. And honestly, neither are we.

And so I wonder how many of us are going through life without anyone who really knows how we're doing in our relationship with Jesus. I mean, think about it. We come to church, we worship together, we might serve in a ministry or attend a small group. We know people, and people know us. But that doesn't necessarily mean anyone knows what's actually happening in our spiritual lives.

Who's asking you how your relationship with Jesus is going? Who knows when you're struggling with sin, wrestling with doubts, or feeling spiritually discouraged? Who's encouraging you to remain faithful when life gets difficult?

And maybe for some of us, the reason we don't have that kind of relationship is because we're afraid to be vulnerable. We don't want people to know we're struggling. Or maybe we think we've been Christians long enough that we shouldn't need someone helping us grow anymore.

But friends, look at the Thessalonians. These were believers Paul had already praised for their faith, and yet he recognized they still needed encouragement. So I gotta ask, and I really want you to think about it: Who knows how you're actually doing in your relationship with Jesus?

And if the answer is nobody, oh I really want to encourage you to consider inviting somebody into that part of your life. Someone you can trust, someone whose walk with Jesus you respect. You don't have to be in a spiritual crisis to need encouragement, and you don't have to navigate your relationship with Christ alone.

But here's what I love about this passage. Paul sends Timothy because he's so concerned about their faith. And then Timothy finally returns with news about how they're doing. Look at chapter 3, beginning in verse 6.

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

Paul was so encouraged after getting Timothy's report. These Christians who he loved so deeply, who he had shared not only the gospel, but his life with, who had been facing persecution, hard things in their lives, they were still standing firm in their faith.

So Paul isn't celebrating because their circumstances have suddenly improved. He isn't celebrating because the persecution has ended. He's celebrating because, in the middle of all of it, they're still following Jesus.

You see it in verse 7. Paul says, "in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith." And then verse 8: "For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord."

That's remarkable. Paul had sent Timothy to strengthen the Thessalonians, but now their faithfulness has become a source of encouragement to Paul himself.

Do you see it? Our faithfulness can become a source of encouragement to others. Now think about that. This is the Apostle Paul, and he needs encouragement too. He's experiencing distress and affliction himself. And hearing that these younger believers are still trusting Christ gives him renewed strength to keep going. When he says, 'now we live,' you can hear his relief and joy. Their faith matters deeply to him. So don't

assume that because someone has helped you spiritually, they never need to hear how God is working in your life. Tell them. Let them know that something you read together helped you obey Jesus this week. God may use that conversation to encourage the very person who has been encouraging you.

But notice something else in verse 10. Even though Paul is celebrating their faithfulness, he's still praying for an opportunity to return and, as he puts it, "supply what is lacking in your faith." He's not suggesting their faith isn't genuine. He's recognizing that there's still room for them to grow.

And friends, that's true for every one of us. No matter how long we've followed Jesus, none of us has arrived at spiritual maturity.

And here's what I love about Paul's example. He genuinely wants to continue investing in these believers. Not just because they need encouragement, but because he loves them and finds tremendous joy in seeing them grow in Christ.

I think about those men who pursued me in Afghanistan. I don't know whether they fully understood how God was using them at the time. But their willingness to reach out, listen, and pray made a lasting difference in my relationship with Jesus.

And I wonder how many of us have walked with Jesus for years, maybe even decades, and have never considered that God might want to use us to strengthen someone else's faith. Maybe you've thought, "Well, I'm not a pastor. I haven't been to seminary. I don't know enough about the Bible. What if somebody asks me a question I can't answer?"

But you don't have to know everything to encourage someone in their relationship with Christ. You don't have to have every answer. You can share what you've learned, open Scripture together, pray together, and be willing to walk alongside someone who's still growing.

And I think there's an incredible joy for believers who are willing to do that for someone else. Imagine seeing someone grow in their love for Jesus, experience freedom from shame, or see themselves differently, to persevere through a difficult season, or begin to understand God's Word more deeply, and then knowing that God graciously allowed you to be part of that journey. It's absolutely wonderful.

So again, I think it's important we ask another question. Whose faith are you intentionally helping to strengthen?

And maybe for some of you, the first step is simply reaching out to someone. Invite them to grab coffee or lunch. Get to know them. Ask how they're doing in their relationship with Jesus. You don't need to have a discipleship curriculum prepared or know all the answers. Just be willing to make yourself available and begin investing in their life.

Now, there's one more thing I want us to see before we finish. Because while Paul recognizes the importance of encouraging and strengthening one another, he also understands that ultimately, it's God who brings about spiritual growth in our lives. Look at how he finishes chapter 3, beginning in verse 11.

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."

You see what Paul's praying for? He wants to return to Thessalonica, but he also prays that their love for one another would continue to increase and that their hearts would be established in holiness when Jesus returns.

So, Paul isn't satisfied that these believers have survived a difficult season. He wants them to continue growing in their love for God and for one another. He wants them to become more and more like Jesus.

And notice how wide that prayer reaches. Paul asks for their love to increase for one another and for all.

Remember, these people are being mistreated. There would be a real temptation to withdraw and care only about the people who care about them. But Paul prays for a love that keeps reaching outward. So as we pray for someone who's struggling, we can also ask God to help them keep loving others. Help them respond patiently at home. Help them resist bitterness toward someone who's treated them badly. And Paul connects that growing love with hearts established in holiness before God when Jesus returns. He's praying for a people whose whole lives are being shaped by the Lord they are waiting to see. That gives our prayers direction beyond simply asking for an easier week.

And it gives us something specific to pray when we meet together. Lord, help us love the person we are finding difficult to love. Show us where we need to turn from sin. Keep making us ready to stand before you when Jesus comes again.

And there's something really important here. Remember back in verse 2, when Paul sent Timothy to establish and encourage their faith? Well, that word "establish" appears again in verse 13. Except this time, Paul's asking God to establish their hearts.

And I love that. Because it reminds us that while God uses other Christians to help strengthen our faith, ultimately, it's God who brings about the spiritual growth in our lives.

We can't make someone grow spiritually. We can't produce faith, repentance, or holiness in another person's heart. But we can make ourselves available and God does the work. We can open God's Word together, encourage one another, speak the truth in love, and pray for one another. And we can trust God to work through those relationships.

And friends, that's the kind of church I want us to be. Not simply a church where people know one another's names, or where we enjoy spending time together, but a church where we're genuinely invested in helping one another follow Jesus.

Because Jesus is coming again. And while we wait for him, we have this amazing opportunity to help another person grow in faith, love, and holiness.

So as we finish this morning, I want to bring us back to those two questions. Who knows how you're actually doing in your relationship with Jesus? And whose faith are you intentionally helping to strengthen?

Maybe for some of us, the next step is to think of someone whose walk with Jesus we respect and ask them to begin meeting with us. And for others, perhaps it's time to reach out to someone we could encourage and invest in spiritually.

You don't have to have every answer. You don't have to be a pastor. But you do need to be willing to love someone enough to care about their relationship with Jesus.

And my prayer is that God would increasingly make us that kind of church. A people who love one another, strengthen one another, and help one another stand firm in Jesus until the day he returns!