

Glimpsing from Earth to Heaven

1 Thessalonians 3

Widely regarded as the most influential business book of the 20th century, Steven Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People sold 7 million copies in over 30 languages.

His first habit, "begin with the end in mind," speaks of always evaluating your life first by thinking of the very end of life and working backwards. In that section of the book, Covey quotes Malcolm Muggeridge, a world renowned 20th century English writer who didn't come to Christ until age 60.

"When I look back on my life, what strikes me most forcibly is that what seemed at the time most significant and seductive seems now most futile and absurd. Success in all its disguises: being known, being praised, pleasures like acquiring money or women, traveling about the world to and fro like Satan, explaining and experiencing whatever Vanity Fair has to offer. On reflection, all these exercises in self-gratification seem like just what Paschal called "licking the earth."

As we continue studying First Thessalonians, we, too, are invited to think about our life with the end in mind. Let's notice Paul's frequent emphasis by seeing the end of each chapter in the book.

Chapter 1, verse 10: **To wait for His Son from heaven** who rescues us from the wrath to come.

Chapter 2, verse 19: **For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?**

Chapter 4, verse 16-17: **For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.**

Chapter 5, verse 23: **Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

And as we study chapter 3, we see that it also ends with the goal that Paul has for believers in Thessalonica. Chapter 3, verses 12-13: **May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.**"

1 Thessalonians continually reminds us to think of the future day when we will meet the Lord in person. That's beginning with the end in mind. In that yet future day, the Lord's goal for all of us is that our hearts will be firmly established in Christ – holy, without blame.

We do this "begin with the end in mind" naturally with personal goals. We put up with inconvenience during the three weeks the kitchen is remodeled. We avoid discretionary expenses as we save to buy a vehicle. High school athletes get up early in the morning to run and train in order to be in shape for the upcoming season. But less frequently do we think of our whole life with the end in mind: starting from when Jesus Christ sits on the BEMA to evaluate the life of each believer and to repay us "according to what we have done in the body, whether good or bad," as 2 Corinthians 5:10 puts it.

When the Lord evaluates your life of faith and my life of faith, He has an end in mind: He'll be looking for Love which abounded toward all men and a holy heart which is blameless. We can also see this in Colossians 1:27-28. *(That to you) God would make known the riches of the glory of this mystery...; (namely) Christ in you, the hope of glory: Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect (that is, complete) in Christ Jesus.*

For that to happen, 1 Thessalonians 3 teaches that our **faith must increase** and our **love must be stimulated**. Let's see how this unfolds, beginning with verses 1-3.

Therefore, when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.

Paul was so fond of the Thessalonians that he missed them greatly. Have you had times when someone was in need, a need that traditionally you would help fill and you couldn't get there? A sick parent. A homesick adult child in military service. Paul was there. He couldn't see or hear how they were doing. He couldn't do anything for them but pray. Though he valued that privilege enough to *mention praying for them nine times in these 89 verses*, he wanted something more tangible. So he sent Timothy.

But why send *Timothy*? For starters, Timothy seems to have not been the lightning rod Paul was. Acts 17-18 mention him being separated from Paul 2-3 times during the Berea/Athens/Corinth days of A.D. 50-51 and it doesn't mention him getting into trouble. In contrast, Paul got in hot water everywhere he went.

This is a subtle reminder that God uses different people to accomplish His purposes than what we might think. Sometimes that means even using someone less trained, less mature. It reminds us that His work is not dependent on certain people.

Timothy was now a young man, likely in his 20's. Remember, in 1 Timothy, written 10-15 years later, Paul still has to tell Timothy "*Don't let anyone look down on your youthfulness.*" He had to encourage him to not be timid in view of his responsibilities, the first of which were (1) Build up and strengthen the faith of the Thessalonians, (2) Shore them up against being disturbed by their afflictions.

Timothy's first job is to **strengthen** and **encourage** their faith. The words here mean to *buttress, fortify, or add support to while drawing alongside*. It's interesting to me that these Christians' faith needs to be strengthened. After all, they've been evangelized by Paul and Silas. How much clearer, bolder, more encouraging help could they get in being made strong Christians? And why would God send the youngest, most timid worker to do this work?

It's also noteworthy that it is their faith that needs strengthening. *Why their faith?* You either believe or don't, right? It's not totally explained here, but we do well to chew on it. Apparently they needed stronger faith so much that Paul, though he was somewhat depressed and really wants his buddies Timothy and Silas with him, is willing to be alone in a strange, unbelieving city (Athens) for them to go help the Thessalonians who already believed. If so, *why?* If so, *how?*

This brings us to v. 3 where we see why they need their faith strengthened. "*So that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions.*" Literally, the idea here is that not a single person will be moved off the target of following Christ with a whole heart – particularly as they encounter hardship.

Recently, we got to meet again with missionaries Fellowship Bible Church supports and edifies – we consider them part of our church. Repeatedly, they asked for prayer. When you pray for a missionary, one prayer you might pray for them is the Lord's Prayer. If you do, you will say on their behalf: *Thy kingdom come and will be done on earth as it is in heaven; Give them this day the bread they need; Lead them not into temptation.*

What temptation is strongest for them? There's a hint found in this verse. The words *disturbed by* are possibly better rendered *seduced in*. It means that in the midst of their afflictions, someone was apparently not only giving them hard times but possibly offering them soft times. Paul is probably concerned that in addition to great hardship including beatings leading to death, they may also be drawn away from close allegiance and growth in Christ through being offered things like better jobs, more acceptance in society, and better opportunities or provisions for their children. Timothy's job is to help strengthen them to stand against afflictions and seductions to forsake Christ.

Paul also reminds them of something important. It's something that we in western society may have forgotten. The end of verse 3 says, "*You yourselves know that we have been destined for this.*" In an emphatic way, Paul underlines the fact that the Thessalonians have been prepared and forewarned that those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. In fact, he says it is God's specific intention that they suffer hardship: "*For hereunto you have been appointed (or destined).*"

See how the idea is carried over into verses 4-5. *“For when we were with you, we kept on telling you ahead of time that we would suffer affliction, and it came to pass, as yourselves know. For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear the tempter might have tempted you and our labor would be in vain.”*

Paul reminds them that hardships follow those who desire to live godly in Christ. Jesus said the same thing: *In this world you will have difficulty*. Married women are commanded to love, honor and support men who often don’t deserve it, and to trust God when finances are frighteningly shallow – all while bearing testimony of Christ. Husbands are commanded to lay down their lives as they lead their families in following Christ even when the family doesn’t want to follow, and even when the weight of work and the challenges of living in an evil age tend to discourage. And though they see their own shortcomings, they are called to continue to grow and to build up the faith of others. Likewise, believing young people are taught to trust God and bear testimony of faith in Christ even while interacting with unbelieving friends and while trying to find their future place in the world. Single adults are commanded to honor God with their bodies as well as their heart and mind and not dishonor Christ by their behaviors even as they see others sin and supposedly get away with it. Parents who teach and train their children to know and grow in Christ must be reminded to gently but repeatedly direct them to know this truth: *Preparing for expected hardship is part of being disciples who are deployed out in the world*.

Following Christ has difficulty. If it didn’t, witnessing of Jesus Christ would be the most commonly engaged-in activity of Christians. After all, we get to tell thirsty people where to find a drink, lonely people where to find a Forever Friend, guilty people where to find a clear conscience, troubled people where to find lasting peace, people whom the Bible says are going to suffer an eternal torment how to find the way to an eternal place of joy and of rich companionship.

Yet as it is, repeated studies by experts in evangelism say that in the average Bible teaching church, only 1 in 10 people have shared the gospel with someone who doesn’t know the Lord during the preceding 12 months.

If we had no more teaching than these verses 1-4, we’d already have something. People then — *and now* — need their faith strengthened so that they can withstand the hardships which accompany standing firm in Christ. And we need to encourage each other to press on.

But Timothy has a third responsibility. He is to *“find out about their faith, lest the tempter might have tempted you and our labor should be in vain.”* He’s to see if they are growing in Jesus. The scripture teaches that Timothy is to “check out their faith.” How well grounded are they in their faith? Do they really know who Jesus is and the difference He makes? Do they stand firmly in His promises? Is their love for their family clearly growing? Is their concern for lost people growing? Do they hold inappropriate, fearful, angry thoughts captive to Christ? Are they winning spiritual battles? Do they understand the change that took place in their lives when they believed? Do they understand that forgiveness doesn’t mean license, that believers will also go through an evaluation with God for their lives and that it will be either a time of rejoicing or deep sorrow? Do they understand what it means to walk in faith? Do they understand how it is possible for them to “always be led forward in victory in Christ Jesus” as Paul will write in a couple of years to another church? Are they growing more and more in the grace and knowledge of their Lord and Savior?

When Timothy finds the answers to these questions, he is to report to Paul. Paul is concerned that maybe there would be little spiritual fruit in their lives. He’s concerned that Satan had distracted, tried and tempted them away from a vibrant, obedient walk of faith. The Bible repeatedly teaches (as in John 15 and Colossians 1 and Hebrews 12-13 and 2 Peter 1:8 and James 2) that if people do not continue to grow in Christ, do not continue learning what they need to repent of and how their faith is to grow and how their love is to grow, that although they are Christians, they are useless to God, for they have failed to walk worthily of Him in the good works He had prepared ahead of time for them to walk in.

Follow along with me as I read vv. 6-8. *But now that Timothy has come to us from you and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we long to see you, for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction, we were comforted about you through your faith. For now, we really live if you stand firm in the Lord.*

Their faith and love are apparent enough for Timothy to see it and report it to Paul. His report majors on these two characteristics of the church: *they are full of faith and full of love*, a love that is first to those in the Body and second to those in the “outside world.” When Paul imagines good news concerning believers in Jesus Christ, what he wants to hear is that the people are walking in a way that their faith towards God reflected in growing holiness and growing love for people is visible.

If Paul had been around here lately, he would have seen missionaries from around the world studying God’s word and encouraging each other’s faith. He would have seen Native Americans who have been treated badly for generations be encouraged by hospitality, love, and fellowship of the brethren. If he had been around lately, he would have seen lay biblical counselors listen and challenge and encourage with God’s Word various men and women who are struggling. He would have seen committed believers from this church ply their trade as Physical Therapists with suffering people and as teachers with students of all ages and do so with the love of Christ. He would have heard of people giving money to support the work of the church around the world. He would have seen a young man cultivate a friendship with a guy through Jiu Jitsu in hopes of sharing Christ with his friend or building his faith in Christ. He would have seen FBC businessmen and -women take time away from work that could increase their income to minister because of their love which was grounded in their faith. He’d have seen some parents pray for and encourage and exhort their adult children walking away from God without judgment and anger and be an example to them. Really, if Paul had been around here, he would have seen countless displays of mercy, hospitality, grace, forgiveness, service, gentle exhortation, patient love and turning to God in faith in situations as varied as the people whose lives were represented. (But no doubt he would also see believers who are living casually regarding their faith and would have reason to exhort the mature among us to stimulate one another to love and good deeds.)

Paul has joy at the way they are living out their faith in distress and affliction. It’s easy to be encouraged when things are going well. But when things are going badly, it’s so easy to despair, so easy to get far from God in our minds, so easy to lose hope that God is really using us towards something good. Paul’s great encouragement is to see that their faith is standing firm even in affliction. *“We were comforted about you through your faith,”* Paul says.

Our continuation in growing in Christ can actually lift someone else who may have otherwise despaired or had little regard for God. If small groups from FBC decided to participate in work projects or decided to write letters and send small gifts — financial or otherwise — to those in real need as in Nigeria or Pakistan or China to encourage them, I believe the faith shown by those efforts and the love revealed by taking the time would probably go a long way to bolstering the faith and comforting of those who often feel forgotten.

Reading verses 9-10, *“For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your faith, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?”*

In these verses, Paul rejoices at their faith. When you invest in someone else’s faith, seeing it grow and be sustained even in hardship is the greatest joy. I remember when I was in Nigeria a few years ago with some missionaries preparing to be launched into the bush, the director of the mission told me that his sorrow is the knowledge that some he sends every year will die doing their work, because of the persecution they will receive from Fulani herdsmen and Muslims. I was so saddened, but it stimulated my faith and that of our son as we saw that their relationship with Christ was so real that they did not consider their lives precious if they could tell people about Christ, even people who would kill them.

But as Paul “praises” them for their lives and their impact on his, his conversation in verses 11-13 shifts from talking to them about their faith towards worship of God. *Now may our God and father Himself and Jesus our Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another and for all people, just as we also do for you, so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.*

When Paul begins to feel joy so deep at their goodness because of what he sees happening in the spiritual realm, he scarcely knows what to say. But he knows the direction to go: He worships. It’s just as Jesus said in Matthew 6: *Let men see your good works and so glorify your Father who is in heaven*. Well, here Paul, in spite of whatever hardship he was in at the time he wrote this, is beyond capacity to express to God sufficiently the thanksgiving that is due God for what He is doing in and through the lives of the Thessalonians.

I believe that Paul, as he writes this, is in one of the moments he will write about later in his letter to the Romans: *There are times when we don’t know how to pray as we should and in those cases, the Holy Spirit utters groanings for us too deep for words*. In that passage, Paul says “*that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that is later to be revealed.*” I think that’s what’s happening to Paul. In midst of his own suffering, their confidence in Christ such that their lives are abounding in love and in faith is simply blowing him away — he’s not sure he can take any more good news. It’s so good to know that such a joy is available to all of us.

We also see in verse 10 (*As we day and night keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face and complete what is lacking in your faith*) that Paul hasn’t quit wanting to see them grow still more in spite of the good report. No, Paul’s love for them is not a “spiritual scalp” — we have them taken care of. He loves and misses having fellowship with them. Yet his personal affection for them, does not blind his purpose. “We wish to complete what is lacking in your faith.” In spite of his encouragement at what he sees in them, he knows that there is always more, always more of Christ into who we are to grow. He is a remarkable mix of accepting, fond, affectionate love and not willing to maintain the status quo for God always has more to do in and through us. It’s a lot like God: He loves us where we are but too much to leave us here.

In these final three verses, we are once again instructed by Paul’s example. First Paul leaves it in God’s hands for his desires (to see them) to come about. He says, “Now may God direct our way to you.” This, too, is a place we need to leave a great many things we want so much. His hands, His timing. Paul’s example: want it deeply, pray without ceasing, trust it in His hands regardless of what He decides.

Second, Paul not only wants to complete what is lacking in their already considerable faith but he wants their already considerable love to grow still more and more. In an emphatic way, He wants their love to increase and abound — kind of like wanting to multiply their love with more — towards all men with the household of God first. Such a desire for more love and deeper faith does not negate contentment nor put the person under a pressure to become more. No, such a desire is actually marked by great rest, a sense of Psalm 46:10 which says “*Cease striving and know that I am God.*” Rather, it negates a passive satisfaction in the place where we are now, for the Spirit bears witness with our Spirit that there is so much more to Christ, so much more that we don’t understand yet.

And finally, Paul reminds them of the outcome of their faith and love: “*God Himself will establish our hearts blameless and holy in time for the day when Jesus comes back and we meet Him.*” Here it is Paul’s desire to communicate again the hope of the Lord’s return and evaluation of us as a motivation to keep growing. It also gives us a benchmark against which to compare our progress in the faith, for Paul is sure to pray for that which we most need.

Discussion

1. If Jesus examined your life today, would he say, “Here is a ‘fellow worker with God’? Are you in the yoke with Jesus? If so, is His yoke easy, His burden light to you? If not, why not?”
2. If the Thessalonians who were led to faith by Paul and Silas needed their faith strengthened, do you? What in your life today shows a need for stronger faith?
3. Under the Holy Spirit’s leadership, Paul selects a meek guy like Timothy to do such a significant job. How can or how does He seem to use you? In what way are you putting yourself in position to be used by Him?
4. Is your love for people growing? How is that happening? Who or what is God using to bring that about for you?
5. As a group, will you pray for one another’s growth in faith so you can prosper spiritually even in affliction, and for your love to grow towards all men – especially the household of faith?