

Lesson 4

Thanksgiving, Prayer, and the Joy of Fellowship

1 Thessalonians 3

Introduction

Like many places in Scripture, the chapter division leaves much to be desired. *Therefore*, verse 1 connects these thoughts to what Paul said in chapter 2. He had wanted to come to them *time and time again* but was *hindered* by Satan (2:18), so Paul and Silvanus sent Timothy:

to strengthen and encourage you concerning your faith so that no one will be shaken by these afflictions (3:2b-3a).

He deeply opened his heart as he expressed his concerns to them. His forced separation from the Thessalonians seemed to intensify his anxiety for them.

3:1-5 - Why Timothy Went to Thessalonica

Paul loved the Thessalonians, calling them his *glory and joy* (2:20). He *had* to know how they were doing – he couldn't stand it any longer. What an excellent quality of a spiritual leader! Paul was filled with genuine affection, love, and care for them and wanted to see them grow in their faith. This was his perspective on all the churches:

I will most gladly spend and be spent for you. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? (2 Corinthians 12:15)

Not to mention other things, there is the daily pressure on me: my concern for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:28).

True spiritual leaders are deeply concerned with the spiritual condition of those they serve. That concern was so great that Paul was willing to sacrifice by sending Timothy to them – even though it made his work more difficult. But it was worth it so they could be *strengthened and encouraged* and *not shaken by these afflictions*.

To be *strengthened* means to support something with the intent of establishing it. Paul wanted them to have a strong faith made secure through receiving the teaching of the Word. Timothy's coming alongside them and living the faith encouraged them, providing them with greater motivation for day-to-day life. The more mature a Christian is, the better he or she is equipped to effectively serve the Lord and withstand the barrage of Satan's attacks. Timothy aimed to ensure they remained steadfast and not swayed by persuasive arguments during persecution. Likely, as Gentiles persecuted them, Jews were encouraging these converts to leave Christianity for Judaism, offering them a way to escape their difficulties.

It appears that Paul spoke of the pressure the Thessalonians were under *during* the trials. *Shaken* was used in the original language to describe a dog wagging its tail and came to describe being flattered by

someone. Perhaps the Jews were trying to “smooth talk”¹² the Thessalonians into converting to Judaism to avoid Gentile persecution. Paul says that rejection, persecution, and affliction are things to be expected when serving the Lord (3:3b). He had warned them in advance that these things would happen (3:4). Paul believed it was likely that Satan had pressured them but doubted they had succumbed. Satan is identified as the *tempter* in verse 5, emphasizing the strenuous nature of Paul's work in Thessalonica, which was far from superficial.

3:6-8 – Timothy Reports Back

Sometime later, Timothy returned to Paul and reported on their *faith and love* (3:6). The *good news* mentioned in this verse is the only place in the New Testament that does not refer to the gospel. So, it becomes apparent how relieved Paul must have been to hear this excellent report. What did Timothy discover while he was in Thessalonica?

1. Their faith and love were from the heart.
2. They loved Paul and desired to see him again.

Upon receiving a positive report about the Thessalonians, Paul felt he was indeed alive again. Their unwavering faith in the Lord inspired him, and he delighted in seeing the Thessalonians stand firm.

He also encouraged them to remain steadfast in their resolve. In verse 8, Paul uses a military term (stand firm) that means not to turn back in the face of an attack. He wanted them to press on.

3:9-10 – Paul's Thankfulness

The Thessalonian church flourished remarkably. Despite being relatively young in their faith, these believers faced significant challenges and trials, yet they emerged victorious. Their unwavering commitment to the Lord and their resilience under pressure were evident. Witnessing their growth and steadfastness brought Paul joy.

But he was also quick to recognize that their success was not merely a result of human effort or his teaching. Instead, he attributed it to divine power at work within the Thessalonians. Their faithfulness was a testament to God's grace and guidance. Consequently, Paul expressed heartfelt gratitude to God for His goodness in sustaining and strengthening the believers. Paul's joy was not self-centered; it was rooted in God's presence. He understood that true joy comes from acknowledging God's involvement in the spiritual life of his people.

Amid this gratitude, Paul's heart longed for personal connection. Separated from the Thessalonians, he fervently prayed day and night. His longing was twofold: First, he desired to be reunited with these dear friends, to see their faces and share in their fellowship once more. Second, he prayed for their continued growth in faith. Paul recognized that no believer is perfect; there is always room for growth and maturity. He prayed that he might contribute to their spiritual development, filling in any gaps or deficiencies in their faith.

In verse 10, the Greek word *katartizō*, translated as “make complete” or “restore,” carries a sense of equipping and mending. Just as one repairs a torn net, Paul wanted to help mend any spiritual

weaknesses or uncertainties among the Thessalonians. His love for them was evident in this persistent intercession.

3:11-13 – Paul’s Prayer

Paul’s prayer consisted of three parts:

Greater Faith

First, Paul prayed that God and Jesus direct our way to you (3:11). In verse 10, he said he wanted to see them face to face and complete what was lacking in their faith. His desire was not only to encourage them emotionally in the things they already knew but also to expand their knowledge of the truth. The trust they would gain from his teaching would empower them to walk in greater obedience to the will of God.

The word *direct* in verse 11 conveys the idea of laying out a straight, smooth path without obstacles. Only by the power of the Lord could the obstacles Satan had placed in keeping them apart be removed.

Greater Love

Those who converted to Christ consistently demonstrate love (John 13:34-35). Paul depended on God’s involvement in their growth of love. Whether directed toward believers or non-believers, this kind of love is a gift from God. *Agape love* is not inherent in human nature¹³. It is a divine love, learned through practice and exemplified by genuine care for others. It is bestowed upon those whom God’s power has transformed. Paul first speaks of love within the local church. It is easier to love those who reciprocate our affection. Our local congregations should be schools that teach people to love those who need the Lord.

Greater Hope

Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians centered on their ultimate glorification, leading to a purifying hope. This hope, rooted in faith and love, finds expression in anticipation of the glory of God. Paul emphasized the necessity of being blameless in holiness before God, recognizing that only He truly knows the hearts of individuals. This purity of heart aligns believers with anticipating Christ’s return and the subsequent judgment, motivating holy living. Paul stressed the importance of purity of heart for standing against temptation and eagerly awaiting Christ’s coming.

In contrast, disobedient believers fear exposure of their sin before the Lord. Peter similarly urged believers to fix their hope entirely on Christ’s grace, living holy lives in anticipation of His revelation (1 Peter 1:13). Both Paul and Peter emphasize that sanctification is the work of God, yet it requires obedience from the believer. Paul’s prayer extends beyond the Thessalonians, encompassing every Christian who desires purity and separation from worldly influences.

What’s In This for Us Today?

We need to prioritize genuine care and concern for spiritual brothers and sisters. With everyone so busy today, it is easy to overlook the spiritual well-being of others amidst our own busy lives. We need to

intentionally seek ways to support and encourage our brethren in their spiritual growth, even if it means sacrificing our comfort or convenience.

Acknowledge God's role in spiritual growth. Just as Paul recognized that the Thessalonians' success was not solely due to human effort, we should also acknowledge God's role in our and others' spiritual growth. This means relying on God's guidance and power supplied through His Spirit rather than solely depending on our abilities or strategies as we seek to mature in our faith and help others do the same.

Pursue Holiness and Hope. We need to see the importance of pursuing holiness and hope in our Christian walk. Like Paul, we should strive to live blameless lives before God, resisting the world's temptations while eagerly anticipating Christ's return. This requires intentionally aligning our thoughts, words, and actions with God's will, leading to greater hope based on our faith in Him.

Demonstrate sacrificial love and persistent prayer. Just as Paul sent Timothy and fervently prayed for the Thessalonians, we should be willing to support and uplift our brothers and sisters in Christ. Additionally, we're encouraged to persistently intercede for them in prayer, trusting in God's power to bring about transformation and growth in their lives.

Conclusion

Despite facing obstacles and separation, Paul's love for the Christians at Thessalonica prompted him to send Timothy to strengthen and encourage them in their faith. Timothy's report to Paul brought relief and joy, confirming the Thessalonians' steadfastness in the face of trials. Paul's gratitude extended beyond human effort, acknowledging God's role in the church's growth and resilience.

His prayer for the Thessalonians reflects Paul's desire for their spiritual well-being, focusing on three key aspects: greater faith, love, and hope. He prayed for God's guidance in removing obstacles and deepening their faith, for the growth of *agape* love within the local church, and their ultimate glorification, leading to a purifying hope. This hope, rooted in faith and love, motivates Christians to live holy lives anticipating Christ's return.

In this lesson, we have seen the importance of genuine care for fellow believers, recognizing God's role in spiritual growth, and pursuing holiness and hope in Christian living. Paul's example of sacrificial love and persistent prayer is a model for all believers seeking to support and uplift one another in spiritual growth.

For Thought and Reflection

1. How does Paul's example of sending Timothy to strengthen and encourage the Thessalonian church challenge our approach to caring for fellow believers today?
2. How can we recognize and acknowledge God's role in our spiritual growth and the growth of others within our Christian community?

3. Reflecting on Paul's emphasis on holiness and hope, how can we cultivate a more profound sense of anticipation for Christ's return in our daily lives?
4. What obstacles or distractions might hinder our pursuit of holiness, and how can we overcome them?
5. How can we demonstrate sacrificial love and genuine concern for others in our modern, busy world?
6. In what areas of our spiritual lives do we need to press on and stand firm, particularly in the face of opposition or temptation?
7. How can we cultivate a more profound sense of agape love within our local church community, especially towards those who may be difficult to love?
8. Reflecting on Paul's persistent prayer for the Thessalonians, how can we deepen our prayer life and intercede more effectively for others?
9. What specific actions can we take to support and encourage fellow believers facing trials or challenges in their spiritual lives?
10. How can we align our priorities and actions with the biblical principles of caring for the spiritual well-being of others and pursuing holiness in our own lives?

¹² Morris, p. 70.

¹³ This is why God pours His love into our hearts upon our conversion, Romans 5:5.