

This is a study that I have had on my heart for some time. It came out of a verse in 1 Thessalonians that I just couldn't get past. It led me to diving deeper on the concept and that's what we are going to look at today.

What's unique about Paul's relationship with Thessalonica is that he did not have long to minister to them. Acts 17 describes Paul's ministry.

Act 17:1-4

(1) Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

(2) And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

(3) explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

(4) **And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.**

Paul went to the Jew first as was his custom and tried to show that Jesus was in fact the Messiah. The great news is some of the Jews believed.

On top of some Jews believing in the gospel, it says "**as did a great many of the devout Greeks**" and "**a few of the leading women.**" Paul brings the gospel message into Thessalonica and it makes a huge impact. As best we can tell Paul is able to stay for about a Month and teach these new believers. His time there comes to a quick close though.

Act 17:5-6

(5) But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

(6) And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "**These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also,**

Notice it is some of the Jews who are Jealous of Paul and the impact that he has made. They form a mob and try to hunt down where Paul is. They can't find him so that attack Jason who is one of the new believers. Notice how they describe Paul and His ministry.

The world was being turned upside down, but it was the gospel message. It is truth and it is powerful. For his safety Paul is sent out of the city. So this is some of the background that leads us to 1 Thessalonians 3.

1 Thessalonians 3:1-2

- (1) 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,**

Paul could not handle the silence he had to know how they were doing in the faith so he sends out Timothy to go find out how the Thessalonians have been doing during this time of separation.

Notice the goal of the visit, to establish and exhort.

Establish **to fix firmly in a place, *set up, establish, support,*
 **to cause to be inwardly firm or committed, *confirm,*
 *establish, strengthen***
 Exhort **to instill someone with courage or cheer, *comfort,*
 *encourage, cheer up*****

Both the establishing and encouraging is accomplished through Christ and his truth. Paul will encourage the Thessalonians of this in:

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

- (1) Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you,
 (2) and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith.
 (3) **But the Lord is faithful. He will establish** you and guard you against the evil one.
 (4) And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.
 (5) May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God **and to the steadfastness of Christ.**

The Lord is faithful to care for the Thessalonians. He is faithful to care for us. Our steadfastness comes from Christ. This is a theme Paul will continue to emphasize. He continues in chapter 3:

1 Thessalonians 3:2-3

- (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.**

“be moved”

σαίνεσθαι

prim., of dogs, ‘wag the tail’ (Hom. et al.),

The word, translated **be moved** or in other translations **unsettled**, is used of a dog wagging its tail and paints a picture of the Thessalonians going back and forth because of their persecutions.

As believers we are not called to a life of being unsettled, we have been called to being established, rooted, firm, not wavering like a dog dancing back and forth.

Colossians 2:6-8

- (6) Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, **so walk in him,**
 (7) **rooted and built up in him and established in the faith**, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.
 (8) See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, **and not according to Christ.**

Again there is so much that is trying to unseat the rootedness that we have been called to. God has given us the ability to have tremendous confidence in Him. **The firmness of these words is not based on our ability to be firm they are based on Him.**

Christ in fact promises us this.

John 16:32-33

- (32) Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me.
 (33) I have said these things to you, **that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."**

Christ promises that in this World we will have tribulation. Life is hard. But notice we are promised His peace. We can have Peace in Him. He is greater than this world and He has overcome everything in this world. Listen to the Psalmist describe the peace that we can have.

Psalms 112:6-8

- (6) **For the righteous will never be moved**; he will be remembered forever.
 (7) He is not afraid of bad news; **his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD.**
 (8) **His heart is steady**; he will not be afraid, until he looks in triumph on his adversaries.

This is the confidence and rootedness we are called to and is available to us when He is our confidence, not in ourselves!

Paul wants the Thessalonians to have this confidence He even warned them of the trials that were coming.

1 Thessalonians 3:4

(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.**

Paul had warned them of this tribulation. Suffering and persecution has been promised to us as believers.

1 Thessalonians 3:5

(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.**

Paul wanted to make sure that these trials caused the believers to grow and not to shrink back. So he sent Timothy to check in on them and get an update to see how they were doing.

Then he uses this interesting phrase. That if they were unsettled and not growing then **“our labor would be in vain.”** This was the phrase that I couldn’t move beyond. Paul was wanting to Check on these new believers and make sure they were established and rooted. He wanted to make sure they were growing.

But if they weren’t he says that his time and effort with them would be in vain? What does that mean? They are saved Paul how can that be a vanity?

One thing I want to make clear is that Paul is not questioning if they are really saved or not. Look at how Paul describes the Thessalonians conversion in Chapter 1

1Th 1:2-5

(2) We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers,

(3) remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

(4) For we know, **brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,**

(5) **because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.** You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

Paul is being very clear He knows they understood the gospel and are saved.

1 Thessalonians 3:5

(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.**

The Greek word for Vain is κενός

1. pert. to being without someth. material, *empty*
2. pert. to being devoid of intellectual, moral, or spiritual value, *empty*
3. pert. to being without purpose or result, *in vain*

What this is saying, is that Paul values their spiritual growth to such a degree, that if the Thessalonians did not continue and mature in the faith Paul say His work with them did not accomplish the end purpose or result.

As I started studying this concept I started to see this language other places in the NT. IT is always in the same context believers not growing or Paul's fear that they will not grow

Galatians 3:1-4

(1) O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.

(2) Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

(3) Are you so foolish? **Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?**

(4) **Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?**

The Galatians were tempted to go back to the Law.

Their suffering should have lead them to a reliance on the Spirit and the Power that can be found in God's grace. They are to continue in the Spirit and it is through trial and suffering that we learn how much we truly can lean on the Spirit.

Paul doesn't want them to miss the result, the spirit filled life, the power and freedom found in a life in the spirit.

Paul makes it clear over and over again they are believers but His ministry to them still could be in vain

Galatians 4:8-12

(8) Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

(9) **But now that you have come to know God,** or rather to be known by God, **how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves**

you want to be once more?

(10) You observe days and months and seasons and years!

(11) **I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.**

(12) Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong.

They are not losing their salvation **they are sacrificing the freedom and spirit filled life that is found in grace.**

εἰκῆ

2. pert. to being without success or result, to no avail (TestJob 39:11; Lucian, Anach. 19) πάσχειν *experience* Gal 3:4. κοπιᾶζειν *work* **4:11.**

In verse 11 it is a different greek word for vain but what is fascinating is it has the same meaning without result, without the desired goal of watching these believers grow and reach maturity and finding what the spirit filled life really is. The freedom and walk that is found in Christ and in His grace.

Paul uses this vain language also with the Philippians.

Philippians 2:12-16

(12) Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,**

(13) **for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**

(14) Do all things without grumbling or disputing,

(15) that you may be blameless and innocent, **children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,**

(16) **holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.**

His ministry would have been in vain- If believers did not grow and reach maturity

This language is so different than anything we are used to. The church in general has places such an emphasis on Salvation we would never hear something like this. Think about what a missionary report would sound like if it was coming from the apostle Paul.

This does not devalue salvation but puts a huge emphasis on how important growth of a believer is. **Have you ever wondered why God doesn't immediately take us to heaven when we become saved?**

He has a plan for us here, Eph 2 :10, This involves us maturing, (Leading people to Christ might be a part of this plan, but glorifying Him is SOOOO much bigger than just that)

Ephesians 2:8-10

(8) For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

(9) not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

(10) **For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.**

God has so much for us in the Christian life. This is our one chance to live for Him in weak frail body with a sinful nature on a sin cursed earth. He desires for us to learn to grow and mature and live a life of faith with Him.

I have had the opportunity to go over this lesson with a few different Sunday Schools. And there has been two fairly consistent reactions.

The first is most marvel at the change of focus. What I mean is I have heard comment after comment on how much Salvation is focused on and emphasized. And that is usually what we hear when someone has not matured or is living a world lifestyle. **Well, at least they are saved. Paul would say it has been a vanity.** A believer who does not mature is missing what God has for them and that is no small thing.

It is ok to mourn a family member or friend that starts living a sinful lifestyle. They are giving up so much! Listen to how James describes a believer living a worldly lifestyle.

Jas 4:4-6

(4) You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore **whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.**

(5) Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, **“He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?**

This describes a believer who has the Holy Spirit in them, notice it says that God yearns jealously at His spirit in them. And yet this believer who is choosing to be a friend of the World and live in strife and enmity with God.

The second most common reaction I have received, has been from older folks who comment how easy it is to lose sight of what’s important in the Christian life. Meaning as I have heard their comments it seems that it comes natural to want to start drifting at a certain age and not approaching the Christian life with the same vigor you once did.

A lot of the people I talk to express being surprised that you never arrive in the Christian life and in fact the Christian life in some ways gets harder the older you get.

And yet this is an encouragement that at every stage of life. You will be entering a season that you have never handled before. And at every stage we must reengage and get everything God desires for us.

This is a lesson Paul had to learn

Php 3:12-16

(12) Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, **but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**

(13) Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. **But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,**

It is so easy to live in the past and to emphasize the “used to’s”

We must leave it behind!

(14) **I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**

If you are a believer God has something unique for you at every different stage and season of life. I encourage you press on towards it. Walk in faith and get everything God has for you.

(15) **Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.**

(16) Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

He says don't slip back and this type of thinking is actually a sign of maturity.

To finish the story the Thessalonians were growing and Paul is thrilled.

1 Thessalonians 3:6-8

(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—

This report of how the believers were doing was a huge encouragement to Paul, **He calls it good news and the Greek word here is the same word used for the gospel “the good news” about Jesus.**

1 Thessalonians 3:7-8

(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.**

Paul lets them know that even as he has been being persecuted since He left them, this great report helps him get through. He says they now live because they are standing, established in the Lord.

Watching believers grow in the faith and getting good reports of people living for the Lord is such an encouragement.