

*1 Thessalonians 3:1-5*

## PREFACE

We now begin Chapter Three. Though it is not part of our passage in this session, I want to look first at v8, for it nicely summarizes the heart of the apostle throughout the chapter.

for now we *really* live, if you stand firm in the Lord.

*Charles Haddon Spurgeon:* Never is the servant of God so full of delight as when he sees that the Holy Spirit is visiting his hearers, making them to know the Lord, and confirming them in that heavenly knowledge. On the other hand, if God does not bless the word of his servants it is like death to them. To be preaching and to have no blessing makes them heavy of heart: the chariot-wheels are taken off, and they drag heavily along: they seem to have no power nor liberty.

Years ago, back in the early 1980s I experienced my first taste of this. The mixed vocal ensemble of which I was a part had just performed my very first musical. [reminder: "musical" = not composing the music, but taking existing songs and writing a story or narrative around them] As my first one, it was a rough effort on my part, but the group performed it well. The story line contained a number of emotional moments that had, I found out after the performance, touched some members of the audience deeply. Later that night, at home, I was overwhelmed by thought of the effect it had had on the audience, and I just sat at my desk weeping.

Over time, as the pastor, preacher, teacher, writer or performer witnesses the positive results of ministry, the senses can certainly be enured by familiarity. The venerable pastor does not literally weep for joy every time a parishioner walks the aisle. Nevertheless, as Paul tells the Thessalonians, if they are standing fast—if their faith has remained firm through time and trials after hearing the word—then he, Paul—and any communicator of the gospel—is really living, he is encouraged, he is *revived*.

It is not self-congratulatory; just as Paul knew at the end of the previous chapter that any crown he receives as a reward ultimately belongs to the Lord, the minister knows that credit for any edifying results to his work in the flesh belongs to the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals.

There is a simple but great word for this in the Greek: *dia* (dee-ah'). More often than not this word is translated "through," and means "the channel of an act." Not just ordained ministers, but every one of us who serve the Lord are simply channels of His acts—the means by which He accomplishes His sovereign will on earth. We are simply the pipe, the conduit through which He does His work.

The heart of the apostle, so emotionally and spiritually linked to those he had ministered to, is revealed throughout this third chapter. He "really lives" because of the faith and obedience of the Thessalonians. He is encouraged, and pleased, but He does not take credit for who and what they are now. Let's read our passage.

**Read 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5.**

**Sidebar:** In Chapter Three Paul repeatedly uses the plural pronouns “we” and “us” to refer to himself alone.

v1

Let’s return to Acts and get our bearings. [see handout] Remember, his trip to Macedonia on this occasion was officially part of Paul’s second missionary journey, and with Silvanus (Silas) rather than Barnabas, who accompanied him on his first journey. Also remember that in our text in his first Thessalonian letter, Paul, writing from Corinth, is referring to what had already transpired. Let’s begin with our trio of Paul, Silas and Timothy in Berea, which was their first stop after Thessalonica.

### Read Acts 17:14-15

The Jews from Thessalonica came down to Berea to run Paul out of that city. While Silas and Timothy remained behind, the Bereans—who “were more noble-minded” (v11)—conducted Paul to safety to the coast. There they caught a ship down the coastline and around the southern peninsulas to Athens. Once in Athens, Paul requested that when they returned to Berea, they send Timothy and Silas to him as soon as possible.

Now, we are not yet at the historic point that Paul refers to in v1. The Bereans have left for home, and Paul is left alone in Athens. Verse 16 reveals his state of mind:

### Read v16.

He was provoked, his spirit was stirred within him, he was distressed by all the statues and shrines that represented the pervasive level of idolatry in the city. Reading between the lines, one gets the impression that when he began speaking in the local synagogue, and then moved on to address the Areopagus, that his heart was not in it.

While his message on Mars Hill was eloquent and, somewhat effective, others ridiculed him when he mentioned the resurrection of the dead (v32). He chose not to fight, to argue with them further. But, v33 tells us that, instead, Paul left the city.

Luke does not record when Silas and Timothy arrived in Athens, but we can safely surmise that it was some time prior to Paul’s leaving the city. Now, with Timothy and Silas with Paul in Athens, we finally arrive at the moment he speaks of in v1 of Chapter Three.

*Therefore when we could endure it no longer...*

Knowing the historical context means that we can now identify the “it.” What could he no longer endure? It wasn’t his loneliness in the city of Athens, because his companions are with him.

*we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone,*

And when refers to being “left behind at Athens,” he is not referring to when he first arrived from Berea. When he left Berea, Silas and Timothy remained there, then later joined Paul in Athens. While the three were together in that city, Paul decided that he could no longer endure *not knowing how the Thessalonians were getting along.*

Even as miserable as he had been during those earlier days in Athens after the Bereans left, Paul was willing to suffer that loneliness again to send Timothy back to Thessalonica as his messenger and fact-finder. Their welfare was more important to him than his own.

**Sidebar:** Keeping our time-line straight, Paul writes these words immediately after Timothy returned to him from Thessalonica with his report.

v2

Paul had two reasons for sending Timothy back to Thessalonica:

- v2: to strengthen and encourage their faith
- vv2 & 5: to determine how that faith was holding up under afflictions and temptation and remind them that this was to be expected

Remember, there was nothing about the church in Thessalonica itself that would have given Paul cause for concern. We have learned already in this letter that they received what he said to them as what it truly was—the word of God (v2:13). He had substantial evidence that their faith was real and active—they were already spreading that word throughout Macedonia. So why his concern?

Some things never change, and there is nothing new under the sun. Since before Christ was crucified for our sins in the first century, the temporal culture has been both punishing those who follow Him, and doing everything it can to tempt them away from Him. Faith in Christ was, is, and always will be surrounded by those who despise it. Faith will always dwell in alien territory—not least in our own bodies. Until the moment we cross the threshold of heaven, each individual's faith will remain at odds with their fleshly nature.

Paul knew this—as does every shepherd concerned for the flock left in his charge. Because before that, he knows it about himself. Ordination does not remove the base nature—in fact, leadership ministry carries within it special temptations of its own. So this had been on Paul's mind ever since leaving Thessalonica, and he could "endure it no longer."

### Read vv2-3.

**strengthen, establish** = *sterizo* = from a presumed derivative of <G2476> (histemi) (like <G4731> (stereos)); **to set fast, i.e. (literal) to turn resolutely in a certain direction, or (figurative) to confirm** :- fix, (e-) stablish, stedfastly set, strengthen.

**encourage** = *parakaleo* = from <G3844> (para) and <G2564> (kaleo); **to call near, i.e. invite**, invoke (by imploration, hortation or consolation) :- beseech, call for, (be of good) **comfort**, desire, (give) **exhort** (-ation), entreat, pray.

Timothy was sent to make sure they were headed in the correct direction, and to bolster their faith—and courage—against affliction. People today need repeated injections of truth—not necessarily because they have forgotten what they learned, or worse, rejected what they learned, but because we dwell in an environment corrosive to faith; it incessantly eats away at us, pulling us in the wrong direction. Timothy returned to Thessalonica to reinforce what they had already learned, and to exhort them to not give in or give up when tribulation or affliction arose.

*so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions*

In v3, almost every translation chooses a different English word for the Greek word *sainesthai*. Perhaps this is because the word is used to describe the way a dog wags its tail when it greets his master. None of the translations are incorrect, but I think that NKJV has it best, with “shaken.”

**disturbed**<sup>nasb</sup>, **shaken**<sup>nkjv</sup>, **moved**<sup>kjv, esv</sup>, **unsettled**<sup>niv</sup> = *sainesthai* = akin to <G4579> (seio); **to wag (as a dog its tail fawningly)**, i.e. (genitive) **to shake** (figurative disturb) :- move; “a state of being shaken or disturbed.” (And what happens when one has been shaken or disturbed? One is off-balance, unsteady on one’s feet.)

Shaken by what?

**afflictions, trials**<sup>niv</sup> = *thlipesin* = from <G2346> (thlibo); **pressure** (literal or figurative) :- afflicted (-tion), anguish, burdened, **persecution, tribulation, trouble.**

*for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.*

**Read Acts 14:19-22.**

v4

And in v4 Paul confirms that he did indeed tell the Thessalonians this.

**Read v4.**

Jesus, too, told His disciples the same thing in his discourse recorded in John 15:18-16:4. There He told them that the world hated Him, therefore the world would hate them. Similar to Paul, later, Jesus explained that He was telling them this “so that you may be kept from stumbling.” The word translated stumbling is a different and more intense word than that translated “shaken” or “disturbed” in our v3. But the warning is very much the same.

**stumbling** = *skandalizo* = **to entrap, i.e. trip up** (figurative stumble [transitive] or **entice to sin**, apostasy or displeasure) :- (make to) offend.

And this is what Paul gets to in the last verse of our passage.

v5

In v5 Paul repeats himself, but adds emphasis to his reason for sending Timothy.

**Read v5.**

*I also sent to find out about your faith,*

In v2 he states that he sent Timothy to “strengthen and encourage” their faith; now he adds that he wanted to know the *condition* of their faith from Timothy’s report.

*for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.*

Of course as he writes this, Paul already knows the answer to this. In his very next sentence (v6) he writes, “But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love...” But earlier, while in Athens, Paul didn’t know the answer; hence, the reasons he sent Timothy, his faithful emissary.

**Read Job 1:6-7.**

And, of course, we are familiar with what Peter writes in his first epistle.

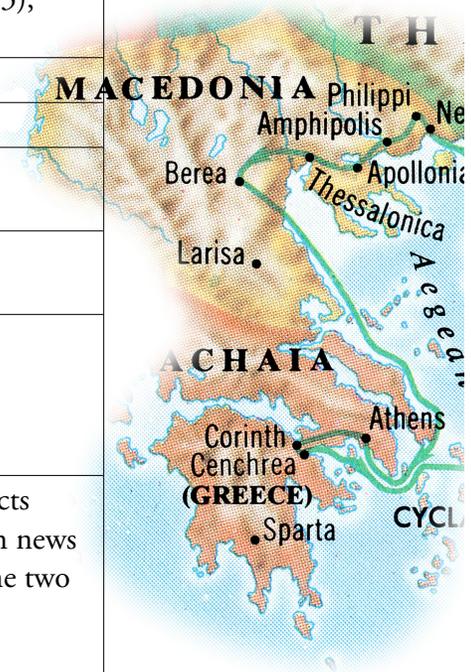
**Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. (1 Peter 5:8-9)**

Satan never tires of his work to destroy, or at least weaken, the faith of Christians. Paul knew well the work of Satan: he had just written, near the end of Chapter Two of this letter, that more than once he had tried to get back to them, but “Satan hindered us.” As a faithful shepherd, he was concerned that Satan was now at work on the new faith of these young believers, and he wanted to know how they were bearing up.

In our next session, Paul will get his answer.

# PAUL ALONE

In Philippi	Paul, Silvanus, Timothy	Timothy from Lystra (Acts 16:1-3), Luke from Troas (Acts 16:8-10)
In Thessalonica	Paul, Silvanus, Timothy?	
In Berea	Paul, Silvanus, Timothy	
to Athens	Paul	Silvanus and Timothy remain in Berea (Acts 17:14)
In Athens	Paul	Silvanus and Timothy arrive later (Acts 17:16)
From Athens	Silvanus sent back to Philip- pi (probably), and Timothy sent back to Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3:2)	
In Corinth	Paul, with Priscilla and Acquila	Silas and Timothy arrive later (Acts 18:5); after Timothy returns with news from Thessalonica, Paul writes the two Thessalonian letters. (1 Thessalonians 3:6)



Session 13

