

1 Thessalonians 3:1-10

Paul's Pastoral Heart

Introduction

Paul had been hindered by Satan from returning to visit the Thessalonians, but he did the next best thing. **We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow-worker** (high and exalted description) **in spreading the Gospel, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith** (1 Thessalonians 3:2). Now Timothy has just returned with **good news about your faith and love** (3:6). To hear they were strong in their faith and love was such a relief to Paul. He was so grateful to God. It leads him to say he is constantly praying that he himself may still see them and supply what is lacking in their faith.

Paul writes immediately on Timothy's return. It is worth making the important point that Paul acted at once and wrote his letter. Of course we can be too hasty in writing and speaking, but more usually we fail in the opposite direction. We feel constrained to act, but we procrastinate and put it off. In the end, nothing gets done, and the good we might have done is left undone. That letter of congratulation or sympathy should have been written when the heart was moved. Because we put it off, it was not done until too late to have the impact it would have had if we had been prompt.

So now in this section we see more of Paul's pastoral heart disclosed. The lessons we learn are not just for those in pastoral work, though it may have undoubted message for them. The principles here are for every Christian.

Affection for these people

Throughout this passage all Paul says is under-girded by deep affection for these people. This is the foundation behind all other points to be made henceforth. Got to love people before we can be any use to them and win way with them. Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1835 about London, "There are three and a half million people in this city – and they are mostly fools!" If we despise people, look down on them, or show contempt for them, we may say goodbye to any hope of doing good to them. People have to be loved and be persuaded we love them if we are to render effective service for them.

Willing to sacrifice himself for them

Paul was so willing to find out how the Thessalonians were that he was willing to be left on his own. So he sent Timothy while he remained in Athens, to which town he had gone after Berea. This was a very real sacrifice. In Luke's account of Paul in Athens in Acts 17:16, he was greatly distressed and grieved because the city was full of idols. It was such a dark heathen city, despite its learning and sophistication. As a Christian missionary, Paul was very upset. And to send Timothy away at this point – the only human being who could give him any understanding and support – was a real sacrifice.

Ever been in a situation where you were completely surrounded by evil day and night? How precious to find one other Christian, and how keenly we feel the loss when we lose that fellowship.

καταλειφθηναι is a strong word for “left alone”. It is often used of dying, e.g. used in the Sadducees discussion with Jesus about the resurrection in reference to a man’s brother dying and leaving a wife (Mark 12:19). In Christian service, if we love, we shall make sacrifices. There will be many sacrifices and inconveniences in Christian service – more than we realize.

#### Full of concern for the Thessalonians

Paul wants to see them strengthened and encouraged. Not put off by trials and persecutions. We cannot avoid trials in the Christian life. We are destined for them. Paul does not promise them a primrose path to heaven. Paul told the disciples at Lystra and Iconium, **We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God** (Acts 14:22). Jesus likewise urged His would-be disciples to count the cost (Luke 14:25). **In this world you will have trouble** (John 16:33).

We cannot avoid trouble as Christians. But we are not to be surprised or put off or discouraged. Paul was so afraid they might have been tempted to give way to despair or even given up the Christian race. The result would have been all Paul’s efforts and preaching would have been in vain.

N.B. The Bible’s descriptions of the Devil. Here he is **the tempter** (3:5). Elsewhere he is “Satan” or “enemy” (2 Thessalonians 2:9), the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:3), the “prince of the powers of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). For Paul, the devil was very real. He was a very powerful and very terrible opponent. In churches and missions, the devil works at both ends – he seeks to frustrate and hinder God’s messengers, and also to deceive and mislead those to whom they minister. He is concerned that the work of God and the church of Christ should not be effective and thrive.

We need to be watchful and prayerful. Someone once said, every time we go to church, the devil goes with us. He sits down with us in the pew, and is with us when we open the Bible and listen to the sermon. He goes with the preacher as he ascends into the pulpit. In innumerable ways he gives him a hard time, e.g. pride, discouragement. A flatterer told John Wesley that he had just preached a splendid sermon. John Wesley replied, “The devil has told me that already”. The devil is concerned to keep us from God, from understanding His truth, walking in His will and living for His glory.

#### Pleasure at news of their progress

Timothy brings back such good news. The Thessalonians had passed with flying colours. Their faith and love still shine brightly. These two graces are the very soul of the Christian life. Their faith in Christ was unmoved, He was still the basis and centre of their lives. They were still keeping hold of God’s Word. Unseen things were real to their souls. The great truths of the Gospel still ruled their thoughts and lives.

Their love for one another made them strong Christians. In a church, as in a family, that means openness and warmth, willingness to deny self, to be interested in others, no suspicion or hostility, of one mind and heart. Also they had pleasant memories and longed to see Paul. He was so pleased he had a place in their hearts. Paul was not always well thought of by his churches – the churches in Corinth and Galatia caused him deep grief.

Since they were so standing firm in faith, he felt a burden and worry had gone, and he could live again (3:8). It was like a new lease of life to him. What else could he do but pour out his heart in thanksgiving to God for all the blessings this brought him.

Always be concerned for one another, especially for those young in the faith and just starting on the Christian road. It is good to see young people starting along the Christian pathway, but the last thing we do is to say our concern has ended. It is just beginning. They have so much to learn, they will encounter so many temptations and snares. They can make so many mistakes in living, in friendships, conduct, use of the Bible, Christian service. Be constant in prayer for them.

#### Continuous prayer about future responsibilities towards them

**Night and day we pray most earnestly** (3:10). This is the second time Paul uses the phrase “night and day” (also 2:9). No doubt as he made tents to support himself Paul was praying. Does this phrase not make us feel we know very little about prayer? And remember, they were only a few on Paul’s very lengthy prayer-list.

He prayed **that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.** The Greek *καταρτισια* means to restore, equip and complete. In the New Testament this same word is used 13 times. It is used of the fishermen “mending” their nets (Mark 1:19), of “restoring” men overtaken in fault (Galatians 6:1), of “forming” the universe (Hebrews 11:3), of “equipping” us with everything good for doing His work (Hebrews 13:21), of “preparing” a body (Hebrews 10:5). Outside the New Testament, this word is used for a surgeon setting bones, restoring to right mind, reconciling friends, equipping an army and fitting out a ship. Here the word is translated “to supply what is lacking”, referring to the things in their lives that were weak or wrong or lacking. Therefore they needed to be restored, equipped, put right. We know from other parts of the letter that they were confused about the Lord’s Return. Some in the church were weak, and some were faint-hearted. Paul longed to see them become complete, mature and whole Christians. He wanted to see them face to face. Nothing is better. We can pray, write letters and use the phone. But there is no substitute for face to face contact.

We have to face the fact that those we care about will have spiritual weaknesses. Whilst not judging or poking nose or being critical, we have to come to true assessment if we are going to help them. Too often we hide behind “we must not judge” to evade our responsibilities.

#### Conclusion

Begin with affection. Be prepared to sacrifice. Be concerned for people’s condition. Be joyful and thankful at their progress, and prayerful about future contact.

