



Encouraged

Seeing changed lives encourages distressed hearts.

1 THESSALONIANS 3:4-13

Most of us are probably glad we do not know all our parents endured when they were trying to raise us. No doubt we caused them some stress and sleepless nights along the way. Parenting is not for the weak at heart. Parents feel distress for those whom they love unconditionally, hoping their warnings will be heeded. The church at Thessalonica was like a child to Paul, and we see him experience the thoughts and feelings of a parent with this church. In the process, both were encouraged through the faithfulness of the other.

**What lesson was most ingrained in you by your mom or dad?
How does your life show their influence today?**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-13

Paul likely wrote his first Letter to the Thessalonians during his ministry in Corinth. Since that time, he had grown to know certain things about the members of this young church. He knew they had turned away from useless idols (1 Thess. 1:9; 2:13). He knew they had developed a reputation that was making a difference for the kingdom across Greece and around the world (1:7-8). He also knew that his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica were following his example and were doing all they could to expand the reach of the gospel (1:6). But it wasn't always that way. Early on, Paul had some concerns about the direction the Thessalonians would take, and he wanted to know about their progress.

Part of Paul's concern came from the way he and the other missionaries were forced to leave Thessalonica. The violence spurred by enemies of the gospel placed Paul, Silas, and Timothy in harm's way. So their friends urged them to leave the city. His hasty departure meant that Paul did not have the time to disciple these new converts as thoroughly as he would have liked. He worried that this leadership void would open the door for false teachers.

While ministering in Athens, Paul dispatched his trusted coworker Timothy to find out how things were going for the Thessalonians (3:1-3). Timothy brought back a report that was even better than Paul could have expected. The Thessalonians had remained strong in their faith, despite persecution. They had not forgotten Paul and wanted him to return (3:6-7).

Their steps toward maturity were a validation of the gospel's message and an encouragement to Paul that his work had not been in vain. With this positive report, he could challenge the Thessalonians to continue moving in the right direction (3:11-13). Also he could devote the rest of the letter to the practical help they would need to live out their faith daily.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:4-13. Create a list of Paul's concerns and feelings. How do Paul's concerns find expression in his actions?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

DISTRESSED (1 THESS. 3:4-5)

⁴ In fact, when we were with you, we told you in advance that we were going to experience affliction, and as you know, it happened.

⁵ For this reason, when I could no longer stand it, I also sent him to find out about your faith, fearing that the tempter had tempted you and that our labor might be for nothing.

VERSES 4-5

Paul experienced distress over the church at Thessalonica because of the persecution the congregation was undergoing. His distress, however, did not lead to inaction. Instead, he acted because of his love for them. Paul's first action had been to provide **advance** warning of persecution to come.

The word **affliction** means a pressing together to the point of crushing something. Paul did not want the church to be shaken by these pressures being exerted on the Thessalonian believers. So out of love he provided advance warning.

The distress Paul felt most likely led to difficult days and sleepless nights. When he **could no longer stand it**, he acted by sending Timothy to check on the church. It was time for him to take steps to check on their wellbeing.

***One of the tactics of the enemy
is to isolate believers.***

The fact that he sent Timothy reveals that Paul was not living in isolation during his affliction. One of the tactics of the enemy is to isolate believers in order to make them feel alone and defeated. Paul and Timothy shared a bond with one another as well as the church at Thessalonica. Paul leveraged this bond and empowered Timothy to serve alongside of him in ministering to the Thessalonian church.

When a believer experiences persecution, financial hardship, physical wellbeing, and emotional health would be significant issues of concern. But Paul was most interested in the **faith** of his brothers and sisters. He understood that their faith was what was truly being challenged and attacked.

Paul and his companions had invested their time and efforts into strengthening the Thessalonian church. If the situation took a bad turn, all that ***labor might be for nothing***. While Satan could not steal anyone's salvation, he could create chaos in the congregation. He could instill faulty doctrine through false teaching. He could plant seeds of suspicion that would produce disunity. And he could use persecution to spread discouragement. This very idea distressed Paul and moved him to encourage the Thessalonians through Timothy's work.

**When have you felt distress over someone's spiritual walk?
How did you respond to that experience?**

REJUVENATED (1 THESS. 3:6-10)

⁶ But now Timothy has come to us from you and brought us good news about your faith and love. He reported that you always have good memories of us and that you long to see us, as we also long to see you. ⁷ Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and affliction, we were encouraged about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you stand firm in the Lord. ⁹ How can we thank God for you in return for all the joy we experience before our God because of you, ¹⁰ as we pray very earnestly night and day to see you face to face and to complete what is lacking in your faith?

VERSES 6-7

The word ***but*** serves as a transition word. A transition takes place in this chapter at verse 6. Paul was distressed, and ***Timothy*** was back with a report. The apostle might have been expecting the worst, but Timothy was returning with good news.

The first piece of good news that Timothy delivered centered on the ***faith and love*** of the church. Their faith led to an outpouring of love for one another. This was a love of self-sacrifice. The church knew of the sacrifice Jesus had made for each of them, and now they were sacrificing for one another. The text does not tell us what their

sacrifices were, but they were significant enough to be reported by Timothy and to rejuvenate Paul’s heart.

Another byproduct of their faith and love was a mutual longing to reconnect. Paul wanted to see these believers, and they wanted to see him. Fighting a battle alongside of another creates a unique bond. Paul and the Thessalonian believers had fought a battle and were still in the battle together. Instead of pushing the two apart, as the enemy desired, that battle was pulling them together.

How is encouragement found in a shared commitment to Jesus?

KEY DOCTRINE: *The Church*

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel. (See Acts 2:41-42; 1 Cor. 1:2.)

VERSES 8-10

Paul was encouraged by their willingness to stand firm in the Lord. The phrase ***stand firm*** has military undertones. Those who are standing firm refuse to retreat. They understand that the battle is raging but will not give one inch to the enemy.

This group of believers was standing firm in the Lord. They were not standing in tradition, personal opinion, or any other secondary matter that might have presented itself. They were standing firm in the Lord, and they were not going to allow temporary persecution to sway them in any manner.

This resulted in gratitude and joy in Paul. He could not stop thanking God for the way they were standing up under the persecution. His gratitude spilled over into rejoicing before God. It was an instantaneous and continuous response.

Paul prayed **earnestly** for those undergoing persecution. Prayer is one of, if not the most, vital tool we have in spiritual warfare. James tells us the faithful prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective (Jas. 5:16).

By mentioning **what is lacking**, Paul was not questioning the substance or the sincerity of the Thessalonians' faith. The Greek wording implies a desire to strengthen and improve their spiritual condition, not to give them something that was missing. The Christian life is an ongoing process, and believers are called to become more like Jesus each day. *What is lacking* should be understood in terms of discipleship. The Thessalonians' salvation was secure, but Paul was concerned about them conforming more closely to the image of Christ.

What practical steps can you take to encourage another believer this week? Why is it important for Christians to “rejuvenate” one another?

FOCUSED (1 THESS. 3:11-13)

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you. ¹² And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone, just as we do for you. ¹³ May he make your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Amen.

VERSE 11

Parents always want to see their children grow in the things they have taught them. When this happens, the parent is apt to respond with significant encouragement as well as continued prompting for growth in specific areas. Paul felt this way toward the church at Thessalonica. His response was to offer prayers for the church that focused on their continued growth.

His first prayer was for growth in fellowship. The faith and love in the church was of such significance that Paul was asking the Father to

direct him back to the Thessalonian congregation. Fellowship is one of the primary functions of the church. Believers should have a deep desire to connect with one another beyond mere superficialities.

Believers should have a deep desire to connect with one another beyond mere superficialities.

VERSE 12

Paul also prayed for continued growth in the **love** the church members had for one another. Paul once again focused on love that is self-sacrificing. The word used in the original language is not a love of desire or even brotherly love. Instead, it is a love that puts others first. Paul offered focused prayer for growth in the type of love that Jesus has for the church.

He prayed that their love for one another would **increase and overflow**. We learn a great deal in studying these two words. The word *increase* means to have more than enough. The context of this prayer is persecution. Paul was not asking for the persecution to be removed. He was praying that there would be more than enough sacrificial love to sustain them through this time.

He also prayed that their love would be overflowing. The term *overflow* means to be excessive, to exceed beyond measure. Paul was praying that the sacrificial love this church expressed for one another would be of such significance that no one would be able to measure it.

VERSE 13

Paul also prayed for their growth in **holiness**. To be holy means to be set apart or to be unique. God's people are called to be holy. We are called to be different from the surrounding culture. We are to live in light of the gospel, demonstrating God's character to a fallen world.

Paul was asking God to make their **hearts** holy. The heart represents the center of who we are. David asked God to search and know his heart (Ps. 139:23). Moses told the children of Israel to love God with all their hearts (Deut. 6:5). Solomon told us to trust in the Lord with all our hearts (Prov. 3:5). When the focus is the heart, the mind and will are most likely to follow.

What part of Paul's prayer would you most like to see perfected in your life? Why?

Make a list of words and phrases in 1 Thessalonians 3:4-13 that reveal an intense emotion at work in Paul. Write a brief sentence explaining the context for each emotion. Think about times you felt a similar passion about a similar issue. How does this exercise help you understand the emotions expressed by Paul?

[illegible]

APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers need encouragement to remain faithful to Christ.
- The faithfulness of a believer encourages others in their spiritual walks.
- Believers can continue to encourage one another through prayers for continued growth in love and holiness.

Who is someone in your fellowship who is facing a struggle that you can check on this week? List the ways you will seek to encourage this person.

Identify other believers who encourage you by the way they live out their faith in Jesus. How does your life encourage others as well? What needs to change in your life so that you are a greater encouragement to other believers?

As a group, pray for your church to experience growth in fellowship, love, and holiness. What actions can your group take to foster the growth of these three characteristics?

PRAYER NEEDS
