

## The Good News That I Didn't Want to Hear

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

“Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, <sup>2</sup>and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, <sup>3</sup>that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. <sup>4</sup>For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. <sup>5</sup>For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain. <sup>6</sup>But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also *to see you* - <sup>7</sup>therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. <sup>8</sup>For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord. <sup>9</sup>For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God, <sup>10</sup>night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith? <sup>11</sup>Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. <sup>12</sup>And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we *do* to you, <sup>13</sup>so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.”

**I think we all agree that the gospel is good news.** It's good news that I am forgiven of my sin; that I have been born into the family; that I am destined for heaven not hell. **All of that is very good news.** And all of that is possible because of what Jesus has done for me.

**When we consider God's plan for us, and where it ultimately takes us, it is absolutely, unquestionably good news.** But I found in the Bible some aspects of that good news that I was hoping I

wouldn't find. One such verse is in our text, as Paul shares his concern for these believers "that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this." **What is Paul saying believers are appointed to experience?** The Greek word Paul uses here means, "trials, affliction, or trouble." No matter how you translate it, it is still not what I was hoping to find concerning God's plan for my life.

I find it very easy to embrace passages like Philippians 4:19, "And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." Or Deuteronomy 28:8, "The Lord will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you." Deuteronomy 28:6, "Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out." **Those are truths in the Bible that I enjoy reading.**

**But what am I going to do with a verse like 1Thessalonians 3:3?** Well, I could just jump over it and try to find something more positive to think about. Or I could just say this just applied to the *Early Church* but it doesn't really apply to us today. **But that would not be being true to God's Word.**

So what is Paul saying about troubles in a Christian's life?

**First, he is saying don't be surprised when it happens.** In verse 4 Paul says, "For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know."

**Now in that context the trouble came as a result of their testimony of Christ.** It could have come in the form of lost opportunities on the job or maybe even the loss of jobs. Conversely, there would be financial consequences to their faith. **Certainly there were social consequences.** A Jewish family would often disown children who turned to the Christian faith. They would lose their

inheritance. **They would lose their family support system.** The community at large was not Christian. In fact, the whole economy and political structure centered around the “divine” Caesar and his favor. Of course, we know from Acts that Paul and others were physically beaten and imprisoned because of the public stand for Christ.

**In 1 Thessalonians 2:18 and 3:5 Paul specifically mentions the devil’s involvement in all this.** Satan resists the propagation of the gospel. Satan looks for opportune times of discouragement to tempt believers and try to bring them down. **Therefore, Paul reminds these believers that behind their persecution there was a spiritual battle going on.** And the biblical fact is the battle has not ended and like it or not there is no neutral ground. That’s why we are told in Ephesians 6 to put on the whole armour of God.

That is why Peter gives us this warning in 1 Peter 4:12, “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.” **There is a tendency for us to think something really strange has happened when a fiery trial comes into our lives.** There may even be the temptation to think God has somehow let us down. But both Paul and Peter are saying that troubles and difficulties are not inconsistent with living for God. **In other words, Jesus did not come into your life simply to make it easier and more enjoyable.** He came to redeem you from eternal destruction and prepare you for eternal glory!

Follow with me as I read from 1 Peter 4:13-16, “But rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.”

**Notice how Peter distinguishes between two kinds of suffering.** In verse 15 he says, “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters.” The Bible teaches us that suffering as a natural consequence of our own sin. **But the Bible also talks about our suffering as a consequence of our commitment to Christ.** One can be eliminated through repentance, but the other may only be eliminated with the Rapture of the Church.

**Second, he is saying watch out for the tempter in those situations.** Look at verse 5, “For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.”

Did you catch Paul’s play on words in that verse - “the tempter had tempted.” **Satan is the tempter and quite simply that’s what he does; he tempts.** He tempted Eve in the Garden. He tempted Jesus in the wilderness. And most of us have learned by now, he tempts us as well.

**But a time of trial and testing has its own special issues of temptation.** When did the devil tempt Jesus to turn stones to bread? He did it when Jesus was hungry. **When did the devil tempt Judas to betray Jesus?** He did it when all their hopes and plans seemed to be falling apart. Satan is an *opportunist*. He is a *strategist*. **He has a short-term plan for your destruction and he has a long-term plan.** But he looks for those moments when he can step in with his lies and suggestions; those times when you are tired or discouraged; those times when you have taken hit after hit; then he looks for an opportunity to deliver a knock out punch. That’s what Paul was worried about concerning these believers.

This truth is very clearly pointed out for us in the account of Jesus’ temptation, as seen in Luke 4:13, “Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time.” **Although**

**those temptations were over Satan would continue to look for other opportunities.** This is exactly what we have been told in 1 Peter 5:8, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” **What, then, is the answer?** Peter gives us the answer in verses 9-10, “Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.” **Look how that passage begins with the devil’s objective - devour.** But *ends* with God’s objective – to perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.

**Don’t lose sight of the end of the matter.** In Psalm 73:2-6 we find godly Asaph very disillusioned about his walk with God. **It looked to him that instead of being the head he was the tail. It looked to him that the advantage went to the ungodly rather than the godly.** So he says, “But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride serves as their necklace...”

**I have no doubt that most of us have had those same feelings.** There are times when it seems as if you just can’t seem to “**get a break**” in life, and you look around and it seems like it is lost and ungodly folks that are having all the luck. So Asaph pours out his complaint to God, as seen in verse 12, “Behold, these are the ungodly, Who are always at ease; They increase in riches.” And in verse 13 he says, “Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence.” And in verse 14 he says, “For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning.”

**Then the key to the whole thing hits him—suddenly revelation comes and he understands what is going on.** Look at what he finally realizes in verses 17-19, “Then I understood their end. Surely You set

them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors.” **The difference lies at the end of the matter.** One ends in *terror* and *destruction*. The other ends in *glory* and *everlasting joy*.

**Third, he says we are to pray for and encourage one another in such situations.** Notice how Paul addresses the whole group. He has no thought of them enduring these things without the support of one another. **He puts himself in the boat with them and them in the boat with him.** Folks, please listen to me tonight, we are in this thing together. **It is not every man for himself.** Our commitment to the Lord is also a commitment to one another.

**Not only has the materialism of our culture invaded the church but so has the individualism.** It is hard for us to comprehend covenant commitment to one another because our society does not think that way at all. **Our society is built on stiff competition.** **There are economic benefits that have been reaped by structuring our economy around the selfishness inherent in fallen man.** That’s why it works. **It is based upon a broad reality.** **That’s why communism failed.** It was based on an idealistic concept out of touch with man’s fallen nature. **But in the church, in the Body of Christ, we are to live by another set of principles.** Instead of selfishness we are to live unselfishly. **Instead of every man for himself it is one for all and all for one.**

**Paul commends these Christians at Thessalonica for the love they are exhibiting toward one another.** They are encouraging each other and supporting one another. Paul sends Timothy to add to that encouragement, as seen in verses 1-2, “Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith.”

**This whole chapter revolves around Paul's concern for them.** That concern caused him to sacrifice something dear. He needed Timothy to be with him at Athens. **It was hard ground.** It was difficult ministry. When Timothy left Paul felt very lonely - you can see that in some of the words he uses. He was stressed out but he sent Timothy anyway because he loved them and wanted them to be all right.

**Paul wanted these people to be so established that they would not be shaken or moved by the trouble they were experiencing.** When people skip over truths like we have here in our text, when people think that salvation is nothing more than an escape clause from Hell, there is very little stability. What we are talking about here tonight is essential to our standing faithfully during times of trial and testing.

**Paul prayed for these people and asked them to pray for him.** He prayed that he himself might go help them in their faith. He prayed that the love they were expressing would abound more and more. **He prayed that they would stand firm and be ready for the coming of the Lord.** Paul didn't just pray out of religious obligation. His prayer for them flowed out of his love for them. I think that is the secret to a sustained prayer life - if God can get our hearts and fill them with love toward hurting people, we will pray.

**You and I may not be experiencing the same troubles that these Christians at Thessalonica were experiencing.** But we deal with the same adversary. We are tempted by the same tempter. **We need each other's prayers and encouragement just like they did.** And we need to keep our eye toward the coming of the Lord just like they did.