



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for June 20, 2010
Released on Wednesday, June 16, 2010**

"Sustained Through Encouragement"

Lesson Text: 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Background Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Devotional Reading: Acts 4:32-37

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

- 1 Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone;
- 2 And sent Timothy, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith:
- 3 That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto.
- 4 For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know.
- 5 For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labor be in vain.
- 6 But now when Timothy came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith and charity, and that ye have good remembrance of us always, desiring greatly to see us, as we also to see you:
- 7 Therefore, brethren, we were comforted over you in all our affliction and distress by your faith:
- 8 For now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord.
- 9 For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God;
- 10 Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith?
- 11 Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you.
- 12 And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you:
- 13 To the end he may stablish your hearts unblamable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to see how Paul used Timothy to comfort and strengthen the Thessalonians until he could visit them again.

Principle: to realize that faith and love can deal with any opposition experienced by believers.

Application: tell how sharing in other believers' experiences gives encouragement in difficult circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

Cast Away or It's a Wonderful Life

The movie *Cast Away* was a big hit a few years ago. It vividly depicted the struggles of a man left alone on a deserted island after an airplane crash. He struggled to survive, to find food, water, and shelter. But more than that, he struggled against his loneliness. Desperate for a friend, he began to speak to a volleyball as if it were a human being.

Contrast that with the famous old movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. In that film the main character is also desperate. But he comes to appreciate how much his life is worth when he realizes the value of his relationships. "No man is a failure who has friends" is a famous line from the close of that movie.

These movies ring true for audiences because they reflect a truth about how God made us. Human beings were made for relationships. When life is challenging, Christians can find encouragement from their sisters and brothers in the faith. Real Christian fellowship gives us comfort, example, support, and even correction. It restores our strength and keeps our minds and hearts set on the gospel that brought us together.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 51

Place: from Corinth

Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians after a forced absence. Persecution broke out against the gospel in Thessalonica, and Paul was forced to leave the city (Acts 17:1–10). As his absence stretched on, it was clear that the church faced difficulties and uncertainties. Paul wrote the letter to address those issues.

But Paul also wanted the young church to know that he, no less than they, was pained by his absence from them. Paul carried a deep burden for the welfare of these new converts. Wanting to know about their situation, Paul sent Timothy, his assistant in ministry, to visit the church and report back.

So in 1 Thessalonians 3, Paul expresses to the Thessalonians his concern for them, his desire to be reunited with them, and his motivation for sending Timothy to Thessalonica to encourage these young believers to stand fast in their commitment to Christ. But he also expresses the joy he experienced when Timothy returned with a good report of the faith, love, and stability of the Thessalonian Christian. This caused Paul to be encouraged.

MISSION FOR ENCOURAGEMENT (1 Thessalonians 3:1-5)

1. Why was Timothy dispatched to Thessalonica? (1 Thessalonians 3:1,2)

Paul was deeply stressed at being away from his Christian friends in Thessalonica, who were experiencing severe persecution (1 Thess. 2:14,15). When he and his companions could no longer stand the strain of separation, the decision was made to give up the assistance of Timothy and send him to visit the Thessalonians and report back.

Such a decision meant that Paul would be *alone* in *Athens*, with all the emotional toll of loneliness. Acts 17:32 tells us that the progress of the gospel was difficult there. So Paul would have had little by way of Christian fellowship in Timothy's absence.

But Timothy's departure also meant that Paul would be without assistance in his missionary work or day-to-day affairs. The burden of Timothy's departure was considerable, but for Paul, the opportunity to reconnect with the Christians of Thessalonica made it imperative that he bear that burden.

Timothy now returned to Thessalonica to strengthen the believers there. To establish someone is "to cause [that person] to become stronger in the sense of more firm and unchanging in attitude or belief - 'to strengthen, to make more firm'" (Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, United Bible Societies).

Timothy was also sent to comfort these believers. The idea is that of coming alongside to actively encourage someone (cf. Eph. 6:22). The Thessalonians were recent converts to Christ and needed instruction and encouragement in their faith. Their level of spiritual maturity made them susceptible to seduction by Satan. Paul and his associates were evangelists who were committed to the ministry of establishing new converts in their faith.

2. What is the meaning and significance of the word "moved" in 1 Thessalonians 3:3?

The Thessalonian Christians are continuing to experience the pressure and opposition that had arisen while Paul was present. Such difficulties might induce them to give up their faith and return to their old lives. But with the encouragement that comes from strong fellowship, they can stand firm and not be moved.

Probably the *afflictions* experienced by the believers are mostly the social pressures they receive from neighbors and family who object to their new faith (1 Thess. 1:9b). To stand against such pressure, they need a strong social network of faith, a fellowship of believers who support each other in hard times. Timothy would help strengthen their new fellowship.

3. Why should believers not be surprised by persecution? (v. 4)

Paul wants his coworkers to remember that persecution and suffering should not surprise them. He reminds them of a point that has been a common part of his teaching, something that he had taught them in his brief time among them: that suffering is an expected part of the lives of God's people who live in a world of evil. God has intended all along that His people will experience trials in the world, testing and proving their faith as they resist the evil that surrounds them (John 16:33; Acts 14:22). When believers *suffer*, it does not mean that God has lost control. Just as Christ suffered, so those who follow Him suffer as well.

4. What was the gist of Paul's concern for the Thessalonians? (v. 5)

This verse repeats a part of what Paul said in verse 1, that he sent Timothy when he *could* wait *no longer* to learn about the Thessalonian Christians' welfare. Paul's primary concern was for the faith of these new Christians. The threat to their faith was no less than the devil himself. The repetitive-sounding phrase *the tempter ... tempted* puts strong emphasis on the possibility that a Satanic attack might have shaken the young believers' trust in Christ.

The outcome of such an attack, if successful, would mean that Paul's labor had been *in vain*, that is, empty and meaningless. Paul's missionary work is entirely focused on bringing people to *faith* in Jesus and the salvation that their faith receives. His work will be for nothing if they do not persist.

5. How much should Christians fear a satanic attack? What are the extent and limitations of the tempter's power in the lives of believers?

It is a mistake to overestimate or underestimate Satan's power. Overestimating his power makes us feel weak and fearful; underestimating it can give us a cavalier attitude so that we are unprepared for surprise attacks. As a creature Satan has limited power, which can be exercised only to the extent God allows. Scripture promises us that God will never allow him to tempt us so much that we cannot resist it, but will always provide a way out (1 Corinthians 10:13). As great as his power is, Satan will flee from us when we resist him (James 4:7).

REPORT OF ENCOURAGEMENT (1 Thessalonians 3:6-10)

6. What three things did Timothy relate to Paul about the Thessalonians? (v. 6)

Timothy came from the Thessalonians to Paul at Corinth (Acts 18:5), bringing good news. To everyone's joy, what he had to report was just the opposite of what Paul feared might have been the situation in Thessalonica.

Timothy related three things to Paul. First, the Thessalonians' faith in Christ was stable and bearing fruit in love even in the midst of trials. Second, the Thessalonians retained very favorable memories of the missionaries and their ministry among them. These recollections were evidence of their love for the Lord and His servants. Third, the Thessalonians deeply desired to see the apostles, just as the apostles desired to see them. There was a mutual longing to see each other in a face-to-face reunion.

7. How did Timothy's report affect Paul and his companions? (vs. 7-9)

The testimony of the Thessalonians, though young in the faith, provided the missionaries with comfort. Timothy had been sent to comfort and to encourage them. Now the older in the faith were encouraged greatly by the younger. The persevering faith of the Thessalonians brought great solace to Paul and his companions. This faith produced love in them, which in turn prompted them to work and to endure in hope (1 Thess. 1:3).

The missionaries experienced a resurgence of energy after hearing that the Thessalonians continued to stand firm in the Lord. They were spiritually renewed (v. 8 of our lesson). The Thessalonians were standing fast in their faith, unmoved by

persecution from their adversaries (cf. 1 Cor. 16:13; 1 Thess. 2:15). The key to withstanding the trials and difficulties of life is persistence of faith in the Lord.

Paul struggled with just how he could adequately express his gratitude to the Lord for the joy he experienced about the Thessalonians renewed (v. 9 of our lesson).. The word "render" refers to paying back an incurred obligation. What heartfelt thanks he would give before God was as nothing in comparison to the joy he had received. Paul recognized that God's hand was at work in their lives (cf. Phil. 2:13).

8. Why did Paul want to visit the Thessalonians? (v. 10)

Even though Paul spent time in prayer night and day for the Thessalonians, he still had a desire to return to Thessalonica. Paul prayed with intensity that he might see the Thessalonians again (3:10). He had a sense of extreme urgency for a visit to Thessalonica.

Paul still wanted to see the Thessalonians face-to-face so that he could instruct and encourage them in the Lord. He wanted to supply what was needed for their spiritual growth. While they were standing strong in faith, there were things lacking due to their level of spiritual maturity. They had room to grow, much as a child develops into adulthood. Paul prayed that he could be present to foster additional growth in them.

For Paul, staying connected to other Christians and serving their needs in the gospel so that they can be made stronger in their faith is the only right response to the wonderful gift God has given in Jesus Christ.

GOAL OF ENCOURAGEMENT (1 Thess. 3:11-13)

9. How did Paul affirm the oneness of the Father and Jesus Christ? (v. 11)

Paul fervently desired a return to Thessalonica, a desire expressed as an appeal to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We have an affirmation here of the lordship of Jesus Christ and His oneness with the Father. First, the Father and Jesus Christ are addressed equally in the prayer. Second, they are the combined subject of the verb "direct," which is singular. The Father and Jesus Christ together would direct, or make straight, Paul's path to Thessalonica.

The prayer that God would make straight the way to Thessalonica was essentially an appeal to remove any possible barriers. Unless God took the necessary measures, Paul would not be able to make the journey (cf. 1 Thess. 2:18). He did visit Macedonia, the region in which Thessalonica was located, a few years later on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:1-4). In all likelihood, he revisited the Thessalonian church.

10. Why did the Thessalonians need to abound in love? (v. 12)

Paul knows the Thessalonians have been living out the gospel's mandate of *love* (1 Thessalonians 1:3). But he knows their love needs to be sustained and *to increase*. If the gospel is about God's love, then people who believe it should be known as those who *abound* in that love—not just for each other, but also love for the unlovely. So Paul prays that the readers will love *all* people.

Paul had demonstrated his love for the Thessalonians by his hard work while he was with them (1 Thessalonians 2:6–12). Recalling Paul’s example, they know the kind of love for which he prays on their behalf.

11. When will believers have their lives and works reviewed by Christ? (v. 13)

Paul’s prayer continues with the request for strong, faithful *hearts*, purely and thoroughly devoted to *God*. Closing with anticipation of Christ’s return, Paul emphasizes a key theme of the passage. What motivates his deep desire for fellowship with the Thessalonian Christians is the profound truth that they will stand together with *Christ* when He returns. What motivates Paul to work for their faithfulness and growth is knowing that they will all stand before Christ with a desire to be pleasing to the one who gave His own life to save them.

The encouragement that believers receive from each other comes from this place. Our Christian brothers and sisters are the people with whom we will spend eternity. Together we are the greatest objects of God’s love, the sinners for whom Christ died. Knowing that implants in us a deep desire to be together and a deep desire to serve Christ in a way that honors Him. So we take encouragement in our service as we share our lives with other Christians.

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** Even the Lord's most godly servants need support and encouragement (1 Thessalonians 3:1,2).
- 2.** Suffering for our faith is not a punishment but an opportunity (vs. 3,4).
- 3.** Our faithfulness amid suffering helps others endure suffering as well (vs. 5-7).
- 4.** The best encouragement we can give to fellow believers is to stand fast in the Lord (v. 8).
- 5.** Desiring to fellowship with and help other Christians is a mark of mature faith (v. 9,10).
- 6.** Our prayers for others should focus on their growth in love and holiness (vs. 11-13).

CONCLUSION

The Family of Faith

Think about what have been some of the best experiences of your Christian life. Chances are good that they were experiences when you were actively working and sharing with other Christians. We naturally take encouragement and derive joy from our fellowship with other followers of Jesus.

Paul and the Thessalonian Christians had the same experience. For them, separation was agony, but a report of steadfast faith was tremendous joy.

In hard times, when we are discouraged or when we just feel empty, it is time for us to reconnect with the family of faith. When we keep those faith relationships strong, we will always know where to go for encouragement, where to find the joy of the Lord afresh.

PRAYER

O God our Father, we thank You that You did not leave us alone. You gave us each other. Please help us love, support, and cherish each other so that we can receive the encouragement that You send us through each other. In Jesus' name, amen!

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main" (John Donne, 1624)

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "**Demonstrated in Action**" and challenge believers to be sanctified by separation from sin and unto righteousness. Study 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12.

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