

# 1 Thessalonians 3

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One of the attributes of the Bible that we often cite as evidence of its authenticity is the humanity of its characters. In real life, most people are not all one way or the other way. Instead, they are a bundle of conflicting and sometimes contradictory thoughts and actions. The men and women of the Scripture share in this same complicated human nature. David was a great warrior, a great poet, a great king, and a man after God's own heart, and yet, this man with so much going for him nearly threw it all away because of his lust for a woman he saw taking a bath. In our generation, we see the great political leaders of our time making exactly that same kind of mistake. David rings true.

However, this evidence of authenticity does not merely appear in the imperfections of Bible personages. We see it also in the way that they present themselves writing, in the way they speak of themselves, of others, and of the time in which they live. Throughout the book that bears his name, Nehemiah constantly interjects pleas to God to remember him and the good he has tried to do, which is only natural for a man who lived in such a frustrating time. If we see David's folly exhibited with Bathsheba, we also see the depth of his sorrow for sin in Psalm 51.

Perhaps most of all, though, we see our most complete human portrait in the writing of Paul. Like many of us, Paul was a strongly emotional man, and he eloquently expressed those emotions in his epistles. They capture his fury toward the false teachers of his day and his exasperation with the foolish Christians who listened to them.

However, all of that emotion had a positive side too, and if Paul's letters are filled with indignation, they are also filled with warmth. In fact, we can legitimately say that he was angry so much because he cared so much. Nowhere is this more evident than in his letters to the Thessalonians. Let's see how this emerges in 1 Thessalonians 3.

## Paul's Mental State.

As we look at this chapter, we're actually going to begin with the tail end of the last chapter, which describes **PAUL'S ATTITUDE** toward the Thessalonians. We see this snippet in 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20. As this text makes clear, all of Paul's discussion in the last chapter about how he cared for the Thessalonians like a nursing mother wasn't just a bunch of rhetoric. When he had to flee the city of Thessalonica to preserve his own life, that was a wrenching experience for him, and the Thessalonians remained uppermost in his thoughts even as he was driven as far south as Athens. Paul didn't accept this exile easily. He speaks of his constant search for a way to return to the city, but also of the way that Satan constantly defeated his efforts. Again and again, the apostle was frustrated in what he wanted. His explanation here for his motives is also telling. He certainly wanted to be in Thessalonica with the brethren he loved, but more than that, he wanted to be there so that he could ensure that they would remain faithful till the Lord returned.

In this joyful, tenacious love, we see a model for us as Christians today. Paul wasn't just politely interested in the well-being of the Thessalonian Christians. Instead, he was consumed by his love for them, and that's the way we need to be in our relationships with each other. We need to care, and care deeply about the lives of all the Christians here. If we have this kind of love, our interactions with one another won't just be on that superficial hi-how-are-you level. Instead, we'll invite one another in, both literally and metaphorically, so that all of our lives are intertwined. That kind of close association is joyful in this life, but it can have even bigger implications in the life to come. Satan picks off the lonely, isolated Christians, not the ones with all kinds of friends in the church. If we keep together, we can keep him out.

This attitude of deep affection for his Thessalonian brethren also fueled **PAUL'S ACTIONS**. Look at how he depicts them in 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2. All of this actually happened in the nearby city of Berea. Paul and his companions had gone to that city after being thrown out of Thessalonica, but the Thessalonian Jews pursued Paul there and stirred up more disturbances. The brethren determined that Paul needed to leave Macedonia altogether and go on to Athens, but Paul left Timothy behind to return to Thessalonica and report to him on how the church there was doing. This was no easy step for Paul to take. There was no church in Athens at this point, it was a famously idolatrous city, and Paul was now headed there all by himself, without any moral support. In fact, if we read between the lines of the Acts account, it's fairly obvious that the trip to Athens was one of the low points of Paul's work, but he took the risk for the Thessalonians.

Brethren, if Paul spent that much effort on keeping track of a church in a completely different province of the Roman Empire, we should be willing to invest effort in keeping track of our brothers and sisters right here. If somebody isn't at services for a couple of weeks, we should give them a call and see how they're doing, not because we're the church police and want them to know they've been bad, but because we love them and care about them. If we feel like somebody else is drifting away from close contact with us, we should look to re-establish those connections by asking them to eat lunch with us during the week or sending them a chatty e-mail. Of course, these are just examples. In today's world, there are a million ways to express the same love, but we should express it somehow, because that's what Paul did.

Paul felt such concern in this situation particularly because of the **AFFLICTION** the Thessalonians were experiencing. He presents his perspective on it in 1 Thessalonians 3:3-5. We've already seen in a couple of previous lessons just what the Thessalonians were up against. Right from the very start of their allegiance to Christ, they were persecuted for it. Some of them, in fact, may even have lost their lives over it. This didn't come as a surprise to Paul. He had warned them to expect this kind of suffering. However, when the shock came, Paul was terribly concerned nonetheless, that Satan would tempt them through their tribulation and they would abandon Christ.

There's a lesson here for us too. When we think of temptation, we often think of what Josh Collier likes to describe as "the hot fudge sundae of sin", that there's some sort of pleasure that Satan is using to allure us into unrighteousness. However, the bad times in our lives can be just as spiritually trying. When we lose a job, or a loved one, or we're super-stressed at work, or we're going through a rough patch in our marriage, those things also endanger our souls. At times like that, we're tempted to give up on Christianity, to chuck it because it's just too much trouble. We need to watch out for those dangerous moments not just in our own lives, but in the lives of others. When we see a brother or a sister in difficult circumstances, we need to be there for them, giving them the support they need to stay faithful.

However, Paul's concern for the Thessalonians in their trying circumstances was alleviated by **TIMOTHY'S REPORT**. Its substance is contained in 1 Thessalonians 3:6-8. By the time Timothy caught up to him, Paul had moved on from Athens to Corinth. There, due to financial restraint, he was barely even a part-time preacher. He spent his weeks making tents with Priscilla and Aquila and did the bulk of his preaching on the Sabbath. Even in this situation, with all it implies about Paul's poverty, he was delighted to hear the news from Thessalonica. When he learned that his brethren there were standing firm in the faith, it lifted a truly immense burden of concern.

This too needs to be part of our interactions with one another. Just as we weep with those who weep, we need to rejoice with those who rejoice. Just as we should be concerned with our brethren's challenges, we should be overjoyed by their blessings. We should be happy to see everyone who passes through these auditorium doors, and we should let them know about it. Nor can this be some kind of fake, stagey joy that we manufacture for the occasion. Instead, we should know enough about one another that we can appreciate their successes because we've been with them through the failures too. Those good times should be the answer not just to their prayers, but to our own prayers too. If we laugh with each other just as we cry with each other, that will bring us a giant step closer to being the family that God wants us to be.

### **Paul's Reaction.**

All of this is what inspired **PAUL'S THANKSGIVING**. We read about this in 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10. As the Scripture makes quite clear, Paul was a verbose kind of guy. He was very rarely at a loss for words. And yet, this is one of the few places where we see him not quite knowing what to say. He's so thankful for the good news about the church in Thessalonica that he can't fully express it. What he does do, though, is constantly pray to God that as well as they are doing, that they will continue to do better, that the faith that has brought them this far will continue to increase.

Just as was true for Paul, our brethren in the church here need to be important in our prayer lives. Let me tell you, brethren—I think we've got a pretty good thing going here in this congregation. How often do we thank God for it? How often do we pause during our weekdays to praise Him for giving us such wonderful brothers and sisters to share our lives and worship with? How often do we thank Him for the unique blessings that each Christian here brings into our lives? We should be overwhelmed by these things, friends, and it should be apparent in our prayers. Likewise, we need to be as free with our petitions as with our thanksgivings. We need to constantly appear before the throne of God seeking His help, not just for ourselves, but for every brother and sister here. We should know what to pray for because we know them, and all of those life details should make it into our prayers. In short, let's pray like we love one another.

We learn more about what our prayers should look like when we look at **PAUL'S PRAYER**. Let's read it together in 1 Thessalonians 3:11-12. This little text is interesting both for what it includes and for what it leaves out. Part of its content is to be expected. After all, if Paul is so anxious to return to them, he's probably going to be praying about it. However, Paul doesn't pray that their lives can be made easier or that the persecution could end. Instead, he wants them to abound in love for everyone, so that God can use that love to establish their hearts in holiness. That, Paul believes, will be the path to his ultimate desire for them—that they be found blameless when the Lord returns.

I think we have a great deal to learn from what Paul looks for here. So often, when we see a brother or a sister in some difficult situation, our immediate prayer for them is that God will take that problem away. If they're sick, we want them to get better. If they're out of work, we want them to find a job. However, Paul's words remind us that that good physical outcome isn't the most important thing. After all, prayers for physical well-being are ultimately futile. None of us are going to stay on this earth forever. What is most important is that their situation, whatever that situation may be, will bring them closer to God. If they're sick, what is most important is that it teach them patience and compassion for the suffering of others. If they're out of a job, what is most important is that they learn that God and their neighbor are more important than money. If we pray in this way, God will surely answer us with what is truly best.