

1 Thessalonians 3

1 Thessalonians 3 (NRSV)

3 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, ³ so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. ⁴ In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain.

Timothy's Encouraging Report

⁶ But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you. ⁷ For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. ⁸ For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. ⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹² And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

¹³ And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

- Paul and Silas established the church in Thessalonica, giving it a distinctive ethos, but they also sought to *nurture* it. They were both evangelists *and* pastors.
- They commissioned Timothy *and* they used letters as means of *exhortation* and *encouragement*.
- Paul has a flashback and talks about Timothy's role as someone who was sent to strengthen and encourage.
- Most scholars accept the manuscript tradition that describes Timothy as *God's co-worker* - or partner (NET); although some translations try to soften that! Whatever role Timothy played, *God* was at work in it because God is the source of the church's nurturing.
- Paul expresses his grave concern for the stability of the church in light of their abrupt departure after three or four weeks. Paul's curiosity gets the better of him. This is not about Paul's ego; it is the pastor's heart for their well-being.
- Paul was concerned that the church might be "shaken" or "unsettled emotionally," because of persecution. And as a consequence, his (hard) work would be "in vain."
- Paul does *not* elaborate on the nature of those persecutions. The use of the language of "the tempter" in 3:5 may suggest the idea of *testing* through suffering or the idea of *temptation*

through seduction. In other words, the Thessalonian believers may have been seduced to return to their former families, friends, and way of life.

- Timothy now returns to Paul and Silas, bringing back glad tidings. It indicates that there is a deep, *mutual bond* between the church in Thessalonica and its founders.
- This perhaps reveals something of the stresses of leadership and the importance of trustworthy people, the strategic value of teamwork and how trials can come upon the life of churches.
- Timothy is a trustworthy co-worker, he does not use this opportunity for self aggrandisement.
- It may be hard for Christians who've never had to suffer for their beliefs to relate to this description; consider someone like Bonhoeffer in Germany opposing the Nazi regime.
- Paul makes another prayer wish in 3: 11-13, and this stylistically summarizes material that will follow! (The section also parallels 2: 17-20.) Scholars have recognized that these prayer "formulas" point ahead to the life of love and holiness and to the letter's later interest in Christ's coming (*parousia*).
- We can also see that this is completely consistent with Paul's sense of thanksgiving and joy within this letter.
- We also recognize the *realism* of the foundational team. Despite all the good things that they can say about the church, they also understand the reality of evil, of persecution, of temptation or seduction, and present this in the context of apocalyptic language (i.e., invoking Satan).
- 3:10 talks about "restore what is lacking" but Paul does *not* state what needs to be restored! Perhaps they will only figure that out once a future visit takes place. But it *does* suggest something is lacking...
- Paul clearly wants to reunite with the church and give further instruction but he is not sure whether he can do that at this time, and so he prays for an opportunity to do so.
- He is certain however that when Christ returns, the Messiah will unite the people of God (3:13). The subliminally, there is a desire for *persistence*.
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- Paul's love for the church overflows in this passage.
- There is a "now and not-yet" understanding of Paul's theology - just as there is in the synoptic gospels' portrayal of the kingdom of God. God *is* at work but there is also a recognition that the *struggle continues*. None of us can claim perfection; the process of becoming the holy people of God is not yet complete. But we draw on the strength of the Holy Spirit, who is the seal and guarantee that we will be part of God's new Kingdom, and we wait with trust for the full transformation of God in our lives and for Christ's coming.