

“Be Encouraged... by God’s work in others!”

I Thessalonians 3:6-13

Introduction: We’ve called our series in First Thessalonians “Be encouraged!” We have seen that we can be encouraged that God is working in us, we can be encouraged through Gospel-centered discipleship, we can be encouraged that God has spoken, He has given us His Word, and then last week we saw that we can be encouraged through fellowship. Paul sought to encourage the Thessalonians, and we don’t want to miss that he also was encouraged by them. The Bible says “*Encourage one another while it is still day...*” (Heb 3:13). That’s another example of the “one another” interdependence that God designed into the church, and that will be our focus in the passage we are looking at today: Be encouraged... by God’s work in others!

The *Maine Idea:** We should rejoice in seeing others established and growing in their faith. It’s not all about “me,” it’s about Jesus building His church! First,

I. The life-changing power of the Gospel... brings encouragement to the church (6-8).

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you- for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

Paul has spoken about their past experience for the most part in this letter so far. He reflected on his coming to Thessalonica and his ministry among the Thessalonians. He spoke of how the testimony of their faith, love, and hope had gone out throughout Macedonian and Achaia and beyond. He spoke of his forced departure from them and his longing to see them, until finally, when he could bear it no longer, he sent Timothy to them to check on their standing and progress in the faith. Now he comes to a transition, to reflecting on Timothy’s return in the present, and also looking ahead as he prays that soon, God willing, He hopes to come to them again. Past, present, and future. *He who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Christ Jesus...*

Paul signals a transition in the letter saying, “...but now Timothy has come...” All that came before was the foundation, it described Paul’s heart and his longing for the well-being of the Thessalonians, *but now*, at last, *Timothy*

has come. Paul's envoy and co-worker, his representative and God's spokesman, had returned from Thessalonica with good news! Paul expresses his joy emphatically, clearly rejoicing in what God was doing among them.

Let's notice Paul's word choice in describing the message Timothy brought: "...and has brought us the good news..." He uses the word that is elsewhere always used to express the proclaiming of the "Good News" of the Gospel, *euangelizomai*. Now that word can and did have a secular meaning in the common Greek of the day, it could refer to the telling of any good news. However, this would be the only case in which Paul uses it without reference to the Gospel. In our men's meeting it was suggested that maybe Paul had a "fuller" sense in mind, a kind of *double entendre*. Timothy's message about the faith and love of the Thessalonians was a testimony to the life changing power of the Gospel. They had not simply turned over a new leaf, they had not formed a reading club and embraced a new self-help philosophy. Their lives were transformed by the power of God through the Gospel of Christ!

Timothy testified, proclaimed the good news of their "...*faith and love*..." *Faith* refers to their faith in God. They had trusted Jesus as the promised Messiah, the promised Rescuer who delivered them, through His willing sacrifice for their sins. Timothy also spoke of their *love*. Which probably referred both to their love of God, and their love for one another. Remember when Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest? He said,

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets..." (Matt 22:37-40).

Both Jesus and Paul used the same word for "love," *agape*, which is used to describe God's love for His people. It is love that is not just emotion, but a choice, a commitment, love that can't be earned, that is unconditional. The word "love" is used so casually in American English in the 21st century, we can read over this text without having it impact us the way it should. The love that Timothy had seen among the Thessalonians flowed from them as evidence of the new heart that God had given them. It was the kind of love that Jesus spoke of when he said, "*By this men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.*" And so, Timothy brought the good news of their faith and love, the Gospel had changed them! It would be good to ask ourselves, has the

gospel changed our lives so visibly, so convincingly? Also, Timothy “...reported that you always remember us kindly...” Paul was comforted by the testimony that the Thessalonians had fond memories of Paul’s time with them. They saw his love for them, and they loved him as a brother in Christ. Their “faith and love” brought joy to Paul’s heart.

Note verse 7, “...for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith...” Paul had had a hard time on the Greek peninsula. Harassed by the Jews, driven out of towns by pagans, beaten, arrested, and rejected... That would be great on a missionary recruitment poster right? Through all of the hardship, Paul stood firm, he did not waver in his calling, because he knew that God was with him, and he could see the evidence that God was working. A remnant chosen by grace was responding to the Gospel, and lives were being changed. So, in all of his *distress and affliction*, he was *comforted* through their *faith*. The word order in verse 7 differs from our English versions, “On account of this we have been comforted brothers, about you, in all out distress and tribulation, through you faith.” Paul is emphasizing the comfort that their faith brought to the team. God’s work in them brought comfort, encouragement, to Paul and his friends.

“For now we live...” I like the way one paraphrase put it, “We can breathe at last!” F.F. Bruce translates, “It is life to us, if you stand fast in the Lord!” Are the people around us, those in our sphere of influence, that important to us? Do we love them that much, that their eternal souls, their standing with God and their growth in faith, is “life to us?” Would we cry, as John Knox did of Scotland, “Give me—or I die!” Is it life to us, to see people around us, trust Him, and grow in the faith? Again, 3 John 3-4, comes to mind,

For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. ⁴ I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

That is the *Maine** Idea in this passage: We should rejoice in seeing others established and growing in their faith. The life-changing power of the Gospel brings encouragement, and...

II. The joy we experience... as God works in the lives of others, spurs us on to faithfully fulfill our part in God’s mission (9-10).

*For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and **supply** what is lacking in your faith?*

What is Paul thankful about? His tribulations abating? His missionary accomplishments? No, he can't thank God enough, *what thanksgiving is adequate*, for what God is doing among the Thessalonians. It brings joy to Paul's heart to see them standing firm and growing in their faith. Don't miss what Paul is saying, he is rejoicing before God, returning thanks to the Lord of the harvest, for His work among the Thessalonian believers. And it spurs Paul on the keep praying that he will have an opportunity not only to send them this letter, but hopefully to come to them again and to encourage them in their faith, *face to face*. And so, Paul is praying earnestly, "*night and day*," that he would have such an opportunity. This is not saying that he prays for them and for his potential visit twice a day, once in the evening and once again in the day time. It's the idea of continual, ongoing prayer, praying without ceasing.

What did he hope to accomplish in such a visit? To "*...supply what is lacking...*" in their faith. I don't think Paul is saying that their faith is deficient or defective in some way. Their faith was sounding forth through Macedonia! But they were new believers, they had more to learn to prepare them for the journey ahead. The verb, "supply" or "perfect" is used in a secular sense in the NT to refer to "mending the nets" (Mt 4:21). J. Stott expressed the sense here:

'Supply' is katartizō, meaning to restore, equip, or complete. It was used in various contexts, for example of a fisherman repairing his nets, a surgeon setting bones, and a politician reconciling factions. The deficiencies Paul detected in their faith will have been 'gaps' both in their doctrinal and in their ethical understanding. He longed to see them complete, whole, mature Christians.

So, it can have the sense of "render complete" which fits here. Paul longed to have more time among them, to teach them more fully, more completely, to ground them more firmly in the fundamentals of the faith. The same verb is used elsewhere to express the idea of perfecting the saints (Eph 4:12). It is a good reminder to us that we have never "arrived" in the Christian life, in the sense that there is no more room for growth and maturing. It is an ongoing process. We all need to be disciples, asking questions and learning, and also disciplers, encouraging others in the faith. Disciples making disciples. That is

God's plan! As we are engaged in that, we will rejoice in seeing others established and growing in their faith.

III. The Promise of His return... encourages us to love and to faithful living (11-13). Paul has spoken of the past and the present, notice how he shifts in this doxology to the future, and as in every chapter, touches on our blessed hope...

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, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

First of all, I want to make sure you notice how Paul refers to the Father, and to the Lord Jesus, in v.11. "Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you..." The synergy between the Father and the Son is emphatic. In fact, the verb "direct" is singular, where we might have expected a plural form. The unity between the Father and the Son, together directing Paul's travel, gives a glimpse of his understanding of Jesus – He is one with the Father, God the Son! Think about the Lord's own teaching about His nature and His relationship with the Father. We read in John 14:8,9...

⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

And again, in John 10:27-31,

²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one." ³¹ The Jews picked up stones again to stone him.

The unbelieving Jews clearly understood what Jesus was saying, and since they didn't believe Him they were going to stone Him! The teaching of the Bible on the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity is not defended, it is assumed. It is like the start of Genesis, "In the beginning God..." There is not defense or argument for the existence of God. God IS, and only the fool says in his heart there is no God. Jesus came and lived in this fallen world. His sheep recognize Him, they hear His voice and follow Him. And it was not only Jesus'

own claims, but the teaching of the apostles. Paul, for example, said much the same thing when he said in the first chapter of Colossians,

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

And so, in our passage, I Thessalonians 3, Paul prays that God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, working together, as One, would direct his path to them. And it is to Him, the Lord, who Paul prays “...*make you increase and abound in **love** for one another and for all, as we do for you...*” That kind of love flows from a new heart. *We love, because He first loved us.* Notice that the love is for *one another*, and also, *for all*. We love our brothers and sisters in Christ, but it doesn’t stop there. We are to love our neighbors. That means we desire what is best for them, what they need the most. And their greatest need is to know the truth about God. We’ve spoken a lot over the years about our place in God’s mission. He has placed you where you are. You are his ambassador!

What is God saying to me in this passage? We should rejoice in seeing others established and growing in their faith. We see again that the life-changing power of the Gospel brings encouragement to the church; We see the joy we experience as God works in the lives of others, spurring us on to faithfully fulfill our part in God’s mission, and, as we’ve seen echoed through this letter, The promise of His return encourages us to love others, and to live faithfully.

What would God have me to do in response to this passage? Are you encouraged by the work of God that you see in the lives of others? It is not a question of pride or selfishly focusing on ourselves, but rather letting the “one another” attitude of the New Testament bring joy to your heart! And it should not be only those who we have personally led to the Lord or are discipling, that bring us joy. After all it is not about us, it is about what God is doing! So we rejoice in missionary testimonies of the church growing in African villages and home meetings in China. We praise God that the fastest growing church in the world, according one report, is in Iran! Only God do that! Praise the Lord. And we celebrate a group of teens coming here Sunday night, and a group of seniors meeting at the Legion Hall at the same time. He is building His church, and we praise God for it! Amazingly, He allows us to have a part in His mission!