

Standing Firm in the Midst of Affliction

1 Thessalonians 3

1 Thessalonians 3 - *“Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in 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 encourage you concerning your faith,³ that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.⁴ For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.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.*

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you—⁷ therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith.⁸ For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.⁹ For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God,¹⁰ night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith?¹¹ Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you.¹² And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you,¹³ 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.”

Background Notes

“Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone” (v1). What did Paul mean when he wrote, *“we could no longer endure it”*? Endure what? Paul couldn’t endure not knowing how the Thessalonian believers were doing when they were faced with persecution. Remember, Paul and Silas were forced to leave Thessalonica suddenly because their preaching of the gospel was causing an uproar. Paul and his team were accused of “turning the world upside down”! Acts 17:6: *“But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.”* That was quite a compliment from the opposition - then or today!

So Paul left Thessalonica and went to Berea, and then on to Athens. But Paul did not go to Athens on a sightseeing tour - he went there to preach the gospel. However, he didn’t forget about the believers in Thessalonica. He was concerned, because it was a very new and young church, and he knew that they were facing serious opposition. How were they holding up under the afflictions? Today he could have called or emailed, but in that day there were no phones or emails, and letters took a long time to travel.

So Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how the believers were doing, and to help establish and help them in their faith. *“...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” (v2).* And 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.”* Paul wanted to make sure that they hadn’t yielded to the enemy’s schemes and threats.

After Timothy’s visit to Thessalonica, he rejoined the apostle Paul, who had traveled on to minister in Corinth. And Timothy brought good news! The Thessalonian believers were standing firm in their faith in spite of persecution and trials. *“But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love” (v6).*

Paul wanted to return to the church at Thessalonica so that *“we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith” (v10).* The idea in the word “perfect” here is “to complete,” or “to bring to maturity.” The Thessalonian believers were young in faith. They needed to know more about the content of the faith so they could grow and mature as believers. They needed to be grounded in the faith.

That’s what we do at Emmaus Bible College. We’re supplying the students with that which is lacking in their knowledge and their faith. Our goal is to help them mature and grow and become complete in the Word, and carry on the work of the Lord wherever He may lead them. That’s what we’re doing in our study of 1 & 2 Thessalonians.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers are destined for afflictions in this life.

Verses 3-4: *“That no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.”*

Was this message given just to the believers under persecution in Thessalonica in the 1st century - or was it written for us today as well? It’s the Word of God to us today! Acts 14:22 says, *“Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”* 2 Timothy 3:12 says, *“All who will live godly lives in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”* You cannot bypass the cross to get to the crown.

At this point you might say, “Well, I haven’t experienced a lot of persecution in my life as a believer!” Two answers could be given here. The first is a question: Are you living a godly life - or are you just “going through the motions” of being a Christian? Second, the word that is used for “afflictions” here is a broad word, and it can refer to more than just physical, bodily persecution. It can refer to any sufferings, including the pressure of circumstances or the antagonism of people.

So the point here is that if we're trying to live a godly, Christ-like life, we **will** experience some form of persecution. And if we're trying to do what the Lord is calling us to do, including sharing the gospel with our neighbors and the people at work, we **will** experience opposition.

Christians are destined for afflictions in this life. This applies to churches, or ministries, or individuals. Try starting a crisis pregnancy center as part of your ministry in your community. Opposition will come out of the woodwork. Try opening a museum to promote the biblical truth of Creation, as the Answers in Genesis ministry did recently. Multiple legal threats will arise. Try starting a noontime Bible study where you work, and you will experience pressure from antagonistic people. Believers are destined for afflictions in this life.

There are many reasons why God allows afflictions to come into our lives, and there are many Scripture passages that bear on this topic. God, in His infinite power, could keep the afflictions away if He wanted - but He allows them to come. Why? Here are three of His reasons.

- **Afflictions prove the reality of our faith.** 1 Peter 1:7 says that the *"genuineness of our faith, like gold, is tested by fire."*
- **Afflictions develop our character.** James 1:3 says that *"the testing of our faith produces patience."* And Romans 5:3-4 says, *"tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope."*
- **Afflictions enable us to comfort others going through similar trials.** 2 Corinthians 1:4 tells us that God *"comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."*

There are many reasons why God allows afflictions and opposition to come into our lives, but believers **are** destined for afflictions in this life.

2. Believers are destined for glory in the life to come.

Verses 11-13 contain the apostle Paul's prayer for the Thessalonian believers. In verse 11 he prayed that he would be able to see them again: *"Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you."* An interesting and important point here is that the verb *"direct"* is *singular*, indicating the **deity of Christ**. (Did you follow the meaning of that argument?) "Our God and Father Himself and our Lord Jesus Christ" are One. The Lord Jesus Himself said, *"I and the Father are One"* (John 10:30).

In verse 12 the apostle prayed that the Thessalonian believers would *"increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you."* In verse 13 he prayed that they would be established in Christian character now so that they

would be blameless when the Lord returned: *“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.”*

In reference to the second coming of Christ, verse 13 says that He will come *“with all His saints.”* Are the “saints” mentioned here angels - or are they believers? Probably both. The Greek word used here means “holy ones.” It is used elsewhere in the New Testament for both angels and believers. Matthew 16:27 says, *“For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels...”* And 1 Thessalonians 4:14 says, *“For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”* So both angels and believers will be with the Lord when He returns to this earth.

However, the main point here is that we will share in Christ’s glory in His kingdom on this earth. Right now we face afflictions, but then – we will share in His glory! Colossians 3:4 says, *“When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.”* In 2 Thessalonians 10:1 we read, *“When He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe.”*

The glory we will share appears to be proportional to how much we’re willing to suffer for the Lord now. Romans 8:17-18 says, *“...if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”* Believers are destined for glory in the next life.

Practical Application

How would the apostle Paul refer to you?

In verse 2 Paul described Timothy as *“our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ.”*

That’s a very nice commendation! Timothy didn’t have a Th.D. (or any other theological degrees) after his name, but what about these advanced degrees in practical service: *“minister of God”* and *“laborer in the gospel”*?

Could this be said of you? Could it be said of me? If the apostle Paul were living today, I hope that he would be able to describe me as more than just “a nice guy.”

Seriously, think it over. How would the apostle Paul refer to you?