**Paul overjoyed with Timothy’s report** 10/9/23

Read: John 16:25-33, 1Thessalonians 3

Text: 1Thessalonians 3

Psalms: 46:1-7, 9:7-12, 3:1-6, 117

Some ministers feel they are being torn away from their congregation when they leave after twenty years. They think they still have a lot to teach their flock. I was recently with a missionary forced to leave her country of ministry after five years. She felt she was just beginning the ministry, but accepted that the Lord had other plans. The apostle Paul had what must be one of the shortest missionary stays ever, at no more than four weeks in Thessalonica. No wonder he felt he had more to teach them and, having left them because of an outbreak of persecution, no wonder he was concerned for them and their faith.

Paul knew the group that rioted against him would turn their attention to the new believers, trying to draw them back to the synagogue. We don’t know of any inducements offered but we do know, from Paul’s response, that they were saying Paul had not returned because he did not care about them- which was a ‘bit rich’ considering their threats against Paul!

Paul and his colleagues, Silas and Timothy, left Thessalonica by night and went to the next town, Berea. But these rioting Jews followed them to Berea and chased them out of this town also. Paul went to Athens with other friends, who he sent back with a message for Silas and Timothy to come quickly (Acts 17:13-15). In the account in Acts Paul seems to be alone in Athens before moving to Corinth, where Silas and Timothy joined him (Acts 18:5). They brought funds such that Paul could stop making tents, and also brought news from the Thessalonians. Here in chapter 3 of this letter we learn from Paul that while in Athens he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to find out if they were standing firm in the faith. The whereabouts of Silas is not clear, apart from him joining Paul in Corinth, along with Timothy.

This letter was written by Paul in response to the news, the ‘good news’ brought by Timothy. In this chapter Paul gives us the details of him sending Timothy, and of Timothy bringing a report to him, even as he shares with them, and with us, his thankfulness and great joy at receiving this good news; it is a chapter of ‘superlatives’, as one writer says. The closing words are a prayer in the form of a benediction, asking God to open the way for him to return, and above all that these believers will grow in faith, in love, and in holiness before God.

**1. Timothy’s task**

This chapter begins with, ‘Therefore’, so it is a continuation of the previous chapter where Paul explained that he wanted to pay a return visit but was hindered by Satan. Paul was ‘hindered’, however he was able to send Timothy, which he did when he could no longer endure not knowing how these dear spiritual children were holding up in the face of severe temptation (3:1,5- ‘no longer endure it’ in both verses). The ‘tempter’ is of course, Satan, who was vigorously attacking new believers, as Paul well knew he would. He was not sure just how Satan was tempting them but persecution tempts or tests believers to seek an easier way. Jesus was tempted to take an easy way to glory or fame and avoid the suffering of the cross.

Persecution can have the opposite effect of confirming and strengthening faith, which is what seems to have happened at Thessalonica. It is often in the absence of struggles and conflict that Satan tempts believers, as with David relaxing on his rooftop! If these new believers had succumbed to temptation to leave the faith, Paul would have been very disappointed for them, and himself- ‘and our labour might be in vain’ (3:5). This concern does not contradict his comment about their, ‘election by God’ (1:4); he is not referring to individuals.

Timothy was a young man from the town of Lystra in southern Turkey of today. He came to Christ after hearing the gospel, presumably from Paul on his first missionary journey. On his second journey, Paul passed through Lystra and took Timothy with him, mentoring him in missionary work. He was like a son to Paul, a fellow worker like no other (Phil 2:20). Paul calls him, ‘our brother and minister of God, and our fellow labourer in the gospel of Christ’ (3:2). When Paul could not go somewhere he turned to Timothy, his most trusted co-worker in the gospel.

Paul sent Timothy to learn about the status of the faith of these believers at Thessalonica, brothers and sisters only 3-4 weeks old in the faith when Paul last saw them (3:5). But Timothy was not just an errand boy; he was an able preacher and pastor in his own right. Paul sent him to ‘establish’ these new believers in the faith and ‘encourage’ them (3:2). Despite his concerns, Paul was confident that the Lord had preserved them in the faith. Timothy would assure them of Paul’s deep love for them and his desire to see them again, which would have been a great encouragement in itself. But he would also remind them of what Paul had taught, especially what he taught about afflictions, that afflictions come to all believers (3:3, 4).

Remember the words of Jesus in John 16:33- I am sure Paul did! Christianity is the only religion that promises its followers tribulation and suffering in this world. Not that this is always made clear in the gospel preached today. Many hear a ‘health, wealth and happiness’ gospel, and are disappointed when such things do not come their way. They are confused when suffering and affliction comes into their lives. To be sure, we are promised victory in the Lord Jesus Christ but it is victory through trials and tribulations, as we see in the Lord Jesus Christ himself. This fallen world loves sin and hates righteousness, so if you love righteousness and hate sin you will have lots of enemies.

Paul had told the Thessalonians this truth from the outset (3:4). He did not hide things from them as he preached the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Let us not be deceiving people when we preach the gospel. Remind people of the last words of Jesus found in John 16:33 so that when they do suffer tribulation they will not be surprised. While telling his disciples that they would face tribulation in this world, Jesus assures them of peace because, ‘I have overcome the world’. In Christ we have treasure that transcends this world. In Christ we know love, joy and peace that this world will never know.

Paul sent Timothy to establish the Thessalonians in the truth of the gospel and to encourage them in their God-given faith. Did he share the words of Jesus we just read? We are not told, but these certainly are encouraging words, don’t you think? In this letter sent to them after Timothy’s visit, Paul says that the Thessalonians should not be surprised or unsettled by their trials because, ‘We are appointed to this, to suffer affliction in this world (3:3). He did not for a moment mislead them regarding what it means to follow Christ. Twice he tells them that they know these truths (3:3,4); they knew because he told them, and they knew because they saw the way the apostle himself was set upon by evil men, by human agents of Satan.

**2. Timothy’s report**

Timothy was sent from Athens to Thessalonica that Paul might ‘know their faith’, know if they were standing fast in Jesus Christ (3:5, 8). He returned to Paul at Corinth bringing ‘goods news of your faith and love’ (3:6); the term ‘good news’ always refers to the gospel, except in this instance. They remained in the faith, and also in the love of the Lord Jesus. They had not lost their first love (cf. Ephesus in Rev 2:4). They continued to love God and love one another, including Paul, despite all the lies they were being told. They had good memories of Paul’s brief time with them and wanted to see him again (3:6). Paul was overjoyed because he wanted to see them also.

Paul wasted no time in writing this letter to them- which may explain his superlatives and struggle finding words to express his feelings. Far from his labour being ‘in vain’, Paul was himself comforted and encouraged by their faith (3:7). Far from preaching for profit, the apostle Paul was preaching the gospel with prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit, that souls might be saved. He ministered because the Lord had called him (1Cor 9:16), and he ministered to please God not men. He ministered knowing the destiny of sinners so, like the angels in heaven, and like any faithful preacher, he ‘rejoiced over one sinner who repents’ (Luke 15:7, 10).

If Paul was ‘worried to death’ over these believers in Thessalonica he was now ‘alive again’ after hearing that they ‘stood fast in the Lord’ (3:8). He had been alone in Athens and then in Corinth so this news was a real ‘shot in the arm’ for Paul. Parents worry a lot about their children, sometimes about the wrong things. What should your first ‘worry’ be for your child? That they will believe in Jesus and walk in faith and love all their days. Paul loved the Thessalonians like his own children.

Paul’s joy at hearing good news from Timothy led him to give thanks to God, to him praying earnestly night and day that he might see them soon and teach them more of the wonderful truths of the gospel (3:10). He does not specify what was ‘lacking in your faith’, but the whole Christian life is one of growing in knowledge of God, and in love for God and for one another. We never stop learning about our infinite and eternal God, which is one reason we come to hear the word preached week by week all our lives. Hearing the word of God, we go away to put into practice what we have learned. Is this why you have come to church? We go away stronger in our faith and better equipped to resist the devil and stand fast in the Lord.

**3. To be holy**

Night and day Paul prayed earnestly that the Lord would open the way for him to return to Thessalonica so he could continue teaching these believers (3:10). In the closing three verses this prayer takes on the form of a benediction, with Paul addressing God in the third person: ‘Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ (3:11). Two persons of the Godhead are addressed as one because, as Jesus said, they are one: ‘I and My Father are one’ (John 10:30). This is an important teaching in itself, especially for monotheistic Jews. Paul’s desire was that God, Father and Son, remove the obstacles Satan had put in the way of his return. This is his first prayer point.

The second thing Paul desired was that the Lord make them increase and abound in love, increase to the point of overflowing (3:12). What about doctrine? What about their knowledge of the Bible? Doctrine is essential but it must lead to love and good works. Paul often begins his letters with doctrine and then tells us how to apply and live out this doctrine: ‘Therefore be imitators of God as dear children, and walk in love’ (Eph 5:1). Paul does not see some as weak in faith but strong in love, or vice versa. Faith and love must go together. James says the same thing when he writes that faith and works must go together (James 2:17, 18). ‘A strong faith, grounded and established in the truth, leads to hearts that love God and love others’.

The second commandment is, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. But who is my neighbour? Jesus made this clear and so does Paul. His desire is firstly that these believers ‘abound in love to one another’ (3:12). I say ‘firstly’ not because this is Paul’s first point but because if there is a lack of love within the church how can we witness to the world? If we love God we must love one another, especially those in the household of faith (Gal 6:10). Paul then urges ‘love to all’. This small church was a powerful witness to the world because of their faith and love, and that during a time of opposition and affliction (1:8).

What was it that Paul ultimately wanted for these believers? That the Lord might ‘establish their hearts blameless in holiness’ before the Lord at his coming (3:13). Note that it is the Lord doing this work in their hearts. Paul was only a brother in Christ and servant of the Lord ministering to them. He could not save anyone or grant anyone a place in heaven. Our only advocate with the Father is Jesus Christ (1John 2:1). We find the word ‘saints’ here but it has nothing to do with the Pope making people saints. ‘Saints’ or ‘holy ones’ means believers who have died, or possibly angels, in the context of the ‘*Parousia*’. The return of Jesus will be in judgment upon this world; both Father and Son again working together (3:13).

God, Father and Son, looks upon our hearts, our whole person. He looks for faith, seeing whether or not we have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. He also looks for holiness, for hearts trusting in him, loving him and loving other people. ‘Blameless’ means ‘above reproach’, while ‘holiness’ means ‘set apart’. Paul’s desire and his prayer was that these believers grow in faith and love such that they will be holy and blameless before the Lord at his coming.