

## ***Faith Under Fire***

### ***1 Thessalonians 3:1-5***

***Who needs a fox's hole or finch's nest?  
A stone's sufficient for my head. To rest  
When slaves are slogging through their nettled night  
Is but another way to fail the test  
Of faith without a shield. Oh that I might  
Do more than grow green leaves into the light.  
My heart is like forgotten fallow ground,  
Without rich roots that flourish out of sight.  
Prevailing faith that's strong and sure and sound  
Won't wilt and wither, broken, bent and brown  
When seared by desert droughts of doubt and pain.  
A heart needs roots of faith that reach deep down  
To sing a psalm when dark despair's refrain  
Assures that heaven's loss and earth is gain.***

There was no sorrow or suffering that Job did not endure. It started with sudden destitution. Job was an intensely godly man. He spent his life managing a large estate as righteously as any man could.

But without warning one day, a messenger came panting in. A band of enemy raiders, he said, had stolen all the oxen and donkeys.

Moments later, another messenger arrived. Other enemies had taken all of Job's camels.

But that was not the worst news those messengers brought. Those enemies were not satisfied with theft. They also hacked all of his hired servants to death with bloody swords.

Job knew each of those servants personally. And it grieved him to have to bear the tragic news to their families.

However, that grief was barely a scratch compared to the disemboweling wound a third messenger brought.

***Your sons and your daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and behold, a great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people and they died, and I alone have escaped to tell you. Job 1:18-19***

But even that was not the end of Job's suffering. He was also stricken with excruciating, bleeding boils all over his body.

Job's wife was driven out of her mind with grief. And through her tears, she bitterly urged her husband to curse God and die.

But he would not. Instead, rebuked his wife with a question that echoes down the ages to each and every person who trusts God.

***Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity? Job 2:10***

There were no mature believers at Thessalonica. None of them had known and trusted Jesus

Christ more than a month or two.

Yet they were all thrust into a world of pain and persecution. That worried Paul. And far away in Athens, he fretted over them.

Their newfound faith was under fire.

## ***The Prospect of Affliction***

A round melon moon silvered the cobbled streets and shadowed lanes of Jerusalem. The Savior's last Passover was finished. And He was walking across town to Gethsemane with His disciples.

Jesus knew His time with those men was measured in hours. So as they walked, He taught them, dispelling any lingering hope they might have of living a life of peace and tranquility.

***If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; John 15:19-20***

A little later on, our Lord repeated the same thing. Only this time His words were stark and straightforward.

***In the world you will have tribulation. John 16:3 (ESV)***

Elsewhere in the New Testament, the word *tribulation* is translated: *trouble, distress* and *anguish*. Our loving Lord warned us that pain, problems and pressures are inevitable if we trust in Him.

And the apostle Paul taught the very same truth at Thessalonica.

***...you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. Verses 3-4***

Years ago, I interviewed an evangelist from Cambodia. And he insisted that what the apostle taught was essential.

"A willingness to suffer," he told me, "is part of our commitment to Christ."

That is what Paul preached. He told both Jews and pagans in that Macedonian city that if they chose to receive Christ as Redeemer and King, it was inevitable. They would encounter anguish and affliction, pressures and persecution.

And that is precisely what happened to those baby believers at Thessalonica. Almost from the first day they repented of their sins and gave their hearts and lives to the Lord Jesus, they were faced with bitter opposition.

Family members argued with them, then abandoned them. Friends became bitter foes. And neighbors who hated the very idea that the Master is the Messiah threatened them with pain and prison.

Right now, we who trust in Christ are not required to endure outright persecution. But that does not mean we will face no affliction at all.

The problems and pressures we face might well be far less than those that Thessalonian saints endured. But we must still deal with affliction. After all, our Savior did not say we *may* suffer affliction. He said we *will*.

Paul also taught the Thessalonians the affliction they faced is neither unusual nor accidental. In fact, he taught that we who trust in Christ as Savior are destined to be afflicted.

Whether large or small, intense or incidental, the pain and pressures God's born again children face are not outside of His perfect will.

After all, our Heavenly Father is never ambushed. And He has no backup plans. That is the way it is with affliction.

Our gracious God is the sovereign ruler of Heaven and earth. And it is His will that those who love and live for Him endure anguish and affliction.

So we who call Christ our Redeemer must remember we cannot possibly face a problem our God does not allow. That brings us right back to Job's question.

***Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity? Job 2:10***

Later in this same letter, Paul insisted that we who trust in Jesus are to be thankful for all things. ***...in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5:18***

Those *all things* include the adversity and afflictions we face. We may not know why our Heavenly Father allows pains and problems to assault us.

But we can be sure that, as our Sovereign Lord, He did allow them. And we can be sure He allowed the difficulties we encounter with our best interest in mind.

After all, He works all things together for our good.

### ***The Problem of Affliction***

By the time Timothy caught up with Paul, the apostle had already settled down in Corinth. And the great missionary's life was so busy, he barely had time to sleep.

To meet his needs for food and lodging, he was laboring away in Aquila and Priscilla's tent shop. And when he was not sewing leather tents, he was preaching and teaching crowds about Christ.

Nevertheless, he was still worried about those baby believers at Thessalonica. He did not have to wonder if those new Christians were suffering the pressures and pains of persecution, either.

The trouble had started before he left them behind. So he knew those saints were stuck in the center of a wicked whirlwind.

Yes, the great missionary was concerned about their physical well being. But he knew that was not the greatest threat they faced.

***...so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; Verse 3***

The word *disturbed* in that verse really means *deceived*. That was the greatest danger in the afflictions those believers faced.

Some saints would be deceived into believing what the Savior feared His disciples might imagine: that it is possible for a child of God to live a life of peace. And that both was and is a foolish fantasy.

That is why Paul reminded the Thessalonians that he had warned them that not only would ***they*** be assailed, assaulted and afflicted. When he warned them, he included himself, saying ***we*** have been destined for this.

The apostle hoped that by being forewarned, they would not be deceived into believing a life of serenity and tranquility is possible. And that warning echoes down the ages to believers today.

We too must expect to encounter pains and problems, setbacks and suffering. If we do not expect them, we are in danger of having our faith disturbed and even destroyed.

There was also a more subtle deception that might disturb their faith. Dear friends and beloved family members sometimes tried to persuade a new Christian to abandon faith in Christ out of love.

That is why Jesus specifically warned that trusting in Him brings division to families.

***I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. Matthew 10:35-36***

If we would trust in the Lord Jesus, He must be much more than our Savior and Redeemer. He must also be our one and only Lord: our Captain, Commander and King.

Indeed, Jesus must be the supreme, all-encompassing love of our life. That is why our Lord taught us that we cannot allow our love for those who are dear to us to keep us from our commitment to Christ.

***He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. Matthew 10:37***

However, Paul was not only concerned that new believers at Thessalonica might be *disturbed* or *deceived*. He was worried that their faith might wither under the blistering sun of persecution.

***For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain. Verse 5***

Jesus told many parables. One of them talked about the seeds a farmer sowed in His field.

***Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. Matthew 13:5-6***

Rainstorms sometimes washed a thin layer of soil on the surface of a flat stone. And some of the seeds landed there.

At first, those seeds sprouted. And they eagerly pushed green stems and leaves up through the soil.

But then the soft, cloudy days came to an end. And the fierce Mideastern sun came out.

Under the searing rays of the sun, the sprout soon withered and died away. That was Paul's concern. And it ought to be ours, too. God allows His children to suffer affliction for a number of reasons. And principle among them is that suffering provides proof.

It shows us if our faith is genuine or not.

### ***Preparing for Affliction***

Our Master did not explain the meaning of most of His parables. But in the case of the seed and the sower, He did.

***The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. Matthew 13:20-21***

The seed that withered away in a thin layer of soil on a flat stone died because it did not have deep roots. And in His explanation, our Savior said the problem with those who hear and respond to the Gospel is precisely the same.

Their problem is that the Gospel does not grow roots deep into their heart and mind. They have a shallow faith that grows no deeper than momentary emotions and does not extend to commitment.

That is why Paul responded to his worries by sending his most trusted assistant back to Thessalonica.

***Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; Verses 1-3***

Paul was not allowed to return to Thessalonica himself. So he sent the best he had.

And Timothy was the very best assistant missionary Paul had. The apostle personally trained and tutored that young man.

Later, the great missionary explained why he trusted Timothy so completely.

***I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. But you know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father.***

***Philippians 2:20-22***

That young man's mission demanded the finest and godliest teacher possible. He was commanded to go and prepared those new believers, not only to endure affliction, but to thrive in it.

And there was and is but one way to do that. The truth of the message that God's Son loved them and died for them, of His perfect life and victory over death, must grow roots deep into the heart.

Timothy knew how that must be accomplished, too. First, he had to strengthen their faith.

Both then and now, faith in Jesus Christ is strengthened by the infallible truth of God's Word. So when he got back to Thessalonica, Timothy reinforced the truths that Paul had taught them.

He reminded them that Jesus was and is and ever shall be the eternal God of glory. And as such, He is the Sovereign ruler of everyone who trusts in Him.

Timothy taught them that afflictions are not only inevitable. They are both allowed and ordained by the Lord who loves them.

At the same time, Timothy did everything he could to encourage those afflicted saints. He reminded them that the Savior's Spirit lives within them. So they did not have to worry that their faith would fail under the pressures of persecution.

Yes, God did allow their affliction. But the dark lord of this world was behind all pressures and problems they faced, just as he is with ours today.

And the Holy Spirit who lived within them then and who lives with believers today is vastly more powerful than Satan.

***You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. 1 John 4:4***

When dark clouds of pain, problems and persecution assail us, we must remember that. And we must never forget. We cannot stand strong in our faith, full of love and praise by relying on our own inner resolve and personal strength.

But if we trust only, utterly and absolutely in our Savior, His Holy Spirit will give us all the strength we need to stand any storm.

Fortunately, our loving Lord not only allows the enemy to assail us. He also gives us calm, quiet days when we do not face any storm of sorrow or suffering, of disappointment or difficulty.

He gives us those soft days and expects us to use them to strengthen our relationship with our Redeemer.

There is no other way to prepare for affliction.