

No Greater Joy *1 Thessalonians 3:6-13*

*At Paran, where the willful weak reside,
Beneath a shaft of dusty sunlight's ray
I sepulchered a seed in soil. It died,
For there is a command it must obey.
In dark and distant days, the Wilderness
Of Sin, (where even those well fed complain)
Was where The Glory sent His Son to bless
The broken, free the slaves and heal their pain.
But soon He died, forsaken as a sacrifice.
He knew to bear much fruit, He had to die.
To lead captivity to paradise
Demands no less than that I crucify
The soul of self. For it's the willing dead
Who grow great roots into Life's holy Head.*

Donna was never pretty or popular. A pastor's daughter, she was painfully shy and sensitive. Friends thought she would never get married. And she almost didn't. But Joe was as bashful and backward as she was.

Their courtship was as quiet and careful as they were. And when they were almost thirty, Donna's father married them. Then they moved to Joe's little valley farm.

But soon, terrible troubles began. First, they were plunged into sorrow when their baby was stillborn. Then gasoline fumes exploded and fried Donna's legs like half-cooked bacon.

The pain and pressure was too much for Joe. One autumn afternoon, he stopped his pickup beside some bright red sumac saplings on a deserted country lane and loaded his 32 revolver.

Donna was frantic when she phoned me. I found Joe sitting in his pickup with the gun to his temple, trembling in a cold sweat.

We talked for a long time. Finally, he eased his finger off the trigger, lowered the revolver and handed me it to me.

All of that happened forty years ago. Since Jimmy Carter sat in the Oval Office, I had not heard a word from Joe and Donna.

Then a few days before Christmas, the telephone rang. Donna had thought of me and wanted to tell me that she and Joe are standing strong, still loving and serving the Lord Jesus. Their fragile faith had not only endured. It had flourished.

Joe is looking forward to retirement now. He and Donna have settled into a sound, stable life. Joe is a gifted accordionist and performs in neighboring churches. And Donna visits the elderly and helps them with shopping and cleaning.

Donna didn't call to thank me. There wasn't much to thank me for. God is the one who carried them through all the storms. No, a word of thanks was not my Christmas gift. My gift was the same satisfaction the apostle John expressed in his third epistle.

I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth. 3 John 4

The Apostle's Pleasure

Paul had walked a long, weary way through thicket thorns of tribulation. At Philippi, he was beaten and cast into prison.

At both Thessalonica and Berea, riots were raised against him. And he was forced to flee. Left alone at Athens, he did proclaim the grace and goodness of his Savior. But the response was lukewarm.

At Corinth, the Savior spoke to the apostle and assured him that he did not need to be afraid. He would not be driven out of that sordid city, as he had at every other city he visited..

But that does not mean life was easy for him at Corinth. Later, Paul described the pressures and problems he encountered.

To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now. 1 Corinthians 4:11-13

Added to those outward pressures was an inner ache. Day and night, he worried and fretted over believers he was forced to leave behind to face persecution.

Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. 2 Corinthians 11:28

Then one day at Corinth, Paul looked up from the tent he was sewing and saw Timothy. His young assistant had just arrived.

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you, Verse 6

It was out of overwhelming concern that Paul sent that young man back to Thessalonica. The newborn believers there were enduring excruciating persecution.

The apostle was unable to go himself. So he sent Timothy, giving the young man specific instructions that he was to strengthen their fledgling faith. Now that mission was complete. And Paul's protege had good news.

Thessalonian Christians were not cowering in a corner. They were standing strong, full of faith and love. And that breathed new life into Paul's sagging spirit.

...for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord. Verses 7-8

It is a source of inexpressible comfort that the faith and fortitude of God's children is not the responsibility of any man, least of all those who first plant faith within them. Without teachers to guide them, Thessalonian believers continued to grow and thrive.

That is what happened in China. When the communists rose up to rule that ancient land, every missionary was forced to board a ship and sail home. At the same time, Chinese pastors were imprisoned. And every Bible was confiscated.

A quarter century later, the communist government allowed a handful of foreign missionaries to visit for a few weeks. And those missionaries were thrilled at what they found. With neither pastors nor Bibles, Chinese Christians had not only endured.

Their numbers had grown. The faith saints at Thessalonica placed in Christ as Savior and Lord was not swept away by all the pains, pressures and problems they endured, either.

Our loving Lord had not allowed Paul to return to that Macedonian port city. And that grieved the apostle.

But perhaps even Paul had to be reminded that the life and love, the courage and Christlikeness of those saints was not up to him.

Our Lord's powerful Holy Spirit lives within each and every believer. And all by Himself, He strengthens us to stand for Him.

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. Romans 14:4

Both day and night, Paul prayed for those stricken saints. And we must never fail to do the same and pray for besieged believers we know and love. But we must never be filled with fear that they won't be able to stand.

The Lord Jesus is not only our Savior. He is also our Shepherd. And He is faithful to watch over His flock. All we have to do is trust new believers into His holy hands. He will do the rest.

The Apostle's Pledge

Do not be misled. Before Timothy arrived, Paul's worries were neither aimless nor unjustified. He had a very specific concern.

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. 1 Thessalonians 3:5

The word *tempted* in that verse really means *tested*. The apostle was worried that the tempter's tests would be so severe, the faith those new believers found would fail.

And there is no doubt how Satan tested them. After all, whether he wants to or not, the devil always leaves his signature.

Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. John 8:44

So at Thessalonica, Satan tested the saints with lies. Speaking through hostile Jews, he filled their ears with ugly attacks.

Those Jews accused Paul of being a false teacher whose teaching was empty and erroneous. They said he was greedy and grasping, a charlatan whose real motive was to milk money from them.

They also accused him of seeking honor and adulation. And they sneered he was a coward who left them in the dead of night to save his own skin, abandoning them to face persecution all alone.

Without a doubt, those Jews were very persuasive as they sold their lies to newborn believers. But those Christians were filled with the Spirit of Truth.

And led by His Light, they refused to believe the tempter's lies.

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you, Verse 6

At all costs, our eternal adversary wants to bring God's people into defeat and disrepute. And one of the sharpest swords he wields as he wages war against us is division.

The apostle James explained precisely how the devil does that.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? James 4:1 (ESV)

The Thessalonians did not allow Satan to inflame their passions. They refused to listen to the lies our Savior's enemies told about His servants. And we must do the same.

We must never listen to people who say ugly, unkind things about other believers. Our Lord looks on them with love. And we must do the same, lest we be defeated by the devil.

Paul was also pleased with the faith Timothy reported new Christians at Thessalonica had. They did not become bitter and blame God for their trials and troubles.

In spite of all the personal pain and hardships they were enduring, they still believed and obeyed the Gospel truths Paul taught them. They never stopped believing Jesus died for them, lives within them, and will return for them one day.

Not only did they still have faith in God. They still loved Him with all their heart and mind, all their soul and strength, too.

We must not get the wrong idea. Paul was not proud that he had planted a seed of faith in both Jews and gentiles at Thessalonica.

Yes, the apostle could see that a marvelous miracle had taken place in their lives. But he knew he was not the one who did it.

For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, Verse 9

That is why Paul thanked God for the spiritual strength and stamina, the faith and love Timothy saw in saints at Thessalonica. He knew God is the one who made the seed sprout and grow.

...neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. 1 Corinthians 3:7

Our loving Lord has many tools. He uses those who are bubbly and buoyant. And He uses those who are slow and studious.

Some servants plant the seed of the Gospel by telling people the Good News that God loves them and Christ died for them.

Other servants help that seed grow by teaching the eternal truths of God's Word. Still other servants serve as harvesters, helping people received Jesus as their Redeemer and King.

And none of those servants have room to be proud and puffed up for the role they play in a person's eternal redemption.

The Savior who loves them did all the work.

The Apostle's Prayer

The apostle Paul was not only pleased with the love and faith Timothy told him glowed like a lamp in those newborn Thessalonian Christians. He was also comforted by that good news.

...brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; Verse 7

However, that does not mean Paul was satisfied with the spiritual state of those saints. Neither does it mean the apostle no longer felt the need to visit them in person.

...we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith? Verse 10

Yes, both Jewish and gentile believers in that Macedonian city had a genuine faith that was strong enough to stand life's storms. Nevertheless, Paul still wanted to revisit those saints.

His purpose was not shallow sentimentality or empty emotion, either. The great missionary knew their faith still had some holes and weak spots in it.

And that stands as a reminder for us. There is a great danger that many sincere saints never consider a threat. Satisfaction!

It is always a mistake to be content with our commitment to Christ and satisfied with our spirituality. The apostle Paul never was. And we dare not be, either.

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:13-14

Paul was like an Olympic runner. He constantly pressed on and strained forward to be more and more like his Master.

And he wanted believers at Thessalonica to do the same. So while Paul complimented the faith and love those Christians possessed, he also prayed that their faith and love might grow.

Paul's prayer was voiced to both God the Father and God the Son. And part of that prayer was personal. He asked his Lord to open a way that he might make the trip back to Thessalonica.

Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; Verse 11

The loving Lord the apostle served answered that prayer, too. But not immediately. It was not until five years later that Paul was finally able to visit beloved believers at Thessalonica.

And that is also a reminder. We must not allow ourselves to descend into discouragement when our prayers are not answered right away. Our Savior's answer might not be *no*, but *later*.

The apostle's prayer was very specific. Thessalonian saints still needed to grow. So that was the focus of Paul's prayer.

...may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; Verse 12

Both then and now, the specific process of spiritual progress begins with love. We must start where the Master said we must.

...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. Mark 12:30

If we fan the flame of our love for Jesus into a blaze, we cannot help but love other believers. If not, our love is little more than a lie.

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. 1 John 4:20

Then as we love both our Lord and other children of God, we will find we also have a love for those who are still lost in sin.

But overflowing with love for our Lord does more than foster love for both saints and sinners. It also helps our faith grow strong and stable. In fact, an increasing love is essential to growth

...so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. Verses 12-13

Yes, the more we love our Lord, other Christians and those who have never trusted Him, the more we will trust our loving Master.

And the more we love and trust our Lord, the more we will want to be holy. And we will do so with one guiding goal in mind.

We will want to be blameless when He comes for us.