

# 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

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*Paul sent Timothy to check in on the Thessalonians, to strengthen them in the midst of their persecutions. He reminds them that they should expect suffering because of their faith in Christ. It should never surprise them, or worse yet, cause them to buckle and stop living a life of faith.*

Paul is lamenting the fact that he was “taken away” from the Thessalonians, referencing when Timothy, Silas, and he slipped away by night from Thessalonica, due to the violent mob that was sifting through the city to find them. He had spent a short period of time with the Thessalonians, forming a church there, and forging fast friendships that resembled a mother or father among children (1 Thessalonians 2:7,11). After escaping to the nearby city of Berea, and making a few failed attempts to return to Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:18), Paul journeyed further south into Greece:

“Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained [in Berea]. Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left.”  
(Acts 17:14-15)

For the time being, Paul waited in Athens and debated with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers there. Although he sent word for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, it seems there was a directive for Timothy to return to Thessalonica to check on the Thessalonians, if at all possible. Paul writes in this letter *Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy back to Thessalonica.*

Paul was perpetually anxious about the state he’d left the Thessalonian believers in. Not only was there a mob of violent persecutors dragging some of the believers into the streets, like Jason (Acts 17:6), Paul had not spent sufficient time, to his satisfaction, instructing the Thessalonians how to withstand this persecution. He had brought them to faith in Jesus, and was beginning to teach them, “You’re going to suffer for your faith. You’re going to be attacked, but you will be greatly rewarded for standing strong” and then the attack came, and Paul left them.

So he was understandably worried for their continued strength to live faithfully as new believers. He could *endure it no longer* not knowing how the Thessalonians were doing, and while he *thought it best to be left behind in Athens alone*, where he would continue to preach the Gospel by himself, at last *Timothy* was able to return to Thessalonica from the city of Berea (about 45 miles away). Paul would eventually leave Athens for Corinth, and would not see Timothy or Silas again until they all reunited there (Acts 18:1,5).

Paul identifies *Timothy* as *our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ*. Timothy had helped teach the gospel to the Thessalonians with Paul and Silas, as evidenced by them both being included as authors of this letter. A disciple of Jesus with a good reputation among his fellow believers, Timothy joined Paul and Silas on their missionary journey while they were in

Lystra (Acts 16:1-3). Timothy went to the Thessalonians *to strengthen and encourage them as to their faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions.*

The afflictions aren't named, but we know that the city was in turmoil when Paul left it, and these problems had probably continued. As many Thessalonians were coming to faith in Jesus Christ and forming a church, some of the Jews living there became jealous and formed a mob of "wicked men from the market place"; they attacked the house of Jason (one of the Thessalonian believers, presumably) looking for Paul and his team; they did not find Paul there, so they grabbed Jason and other believers and took them to the city rulers, claiming that the believers in Jesus were causing trouble all over the world, and were breaking Caesar's laws, and worshipping another King, other than Caesar; the crowds as well as the city authorities were "stirred up," meaning that the mob evidently turned the entire town against anyone who believed in Jesus (Acts 17:5-9).

So Timothy was sent to discover how the church in Thessalonica was doing, and to *strengthen and encourage their faith*, so that they would prevail over the *afflictions* pressed upon them by their neighbors and local government, and continue to live faithfully. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that while he was with them, he specifically warned them that they would be persecuted, *telling them in advance that we were going to suffer affliction*. Paul had recently been beaten and imprisoned in Philippi (Acts 16:22-24). He knew that opposition was inevitable to all who believed in Jesus. Thus he explained to the Thessalonians *that believers have been destined* for suffering.

Paul repeats that *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*. There was never any doubt that people would attack the Thessalonians for their new faith; what was in question was how the Thessalonians would deal with these *afflictions*. What perspective they would take after experiencing the world's opposition? The attacks *came to pass*, as the Thessalonians *know*, and they came to pass even while Paul was there, the very reason he had to sneak away by night before he was ready to depart from the Thessalonians.

Again Paul states *For this reason* (that they were being persecuted for their faith) *when he could endure it no longer*, (he could not stand not knowing what happened to the Thessalonians after he escaped from their city), *I also sent to find out about your faith*, referencing Timothy who was finally able to slip back into Thessalonica to reunite with them. Paul states his *fear* for them clearly: *that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.*

The *tempter* is Satan, God's adversary, who tempted Eve and led to the fall of humankind into sin (Genesis 3:4-5); Satan also tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1). In both instances, Satan's effort was to cause his target to abandon living a life of faithful obedience to God—Eve gave in to this temptation by eating the fruit, whereas Jesus rebuked Satan with scripture and lived a life of perfect obedience to God, even unto death on a cross (Philippians 2:8). The author of Hebrews draws attention to how Jesus was *tempted* to avoid suffering, and that He is able to help believers when they are faced with suffering and the temptation to abandon their life of faith, "For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted." (Hebrews 2:18).

Paul's fear was that the *tempter might have tempted* the Thessalonians into abandoning their faith, and stop walking in obedience to the commands of Jesus. This would have rendered Paul, Silas, and Timothy's *labor* pointless. Their work and efforts teaching them to live lives of faith toward Jesus would have been *in vain*.

Note that Paul says his labor would be in vain if the Thessalonians faltered due to persecution. That's because if we are not faithful witnesses, and don't endure until we see Jesus, then our primary opportunity on this earth is wasted. The main benefit we gain from this life is coming to know Jesus by faith, and coming to intimately know other people through an intimate walk of faith.

The purpose of Paul's discipleship was to equip the Thessalonians to live faithfully in difficulty. His "hope" and "joy" and "glory" and "crown of exultation" was the picture of Jesus's second coming, with the people whom Paul had led to the Lord standing in His presence, having endured persecution to the very end (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). Paul and company's discipleship emphasis was to endure persecution while remaining a faithful witness in order to gain the great benefits God has promised for faithfulness. Paul described to the Corinthians the great rewards God has for those who love Him, and continue in faithful obedience, in this way:

"Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard,  
And which have not entered the heart of man,  
All that God has prepared for those who love Him."  
(1 Corinthians 2:9)

Paul's perspective is that the rewards God has in mind for those who continue in faithful obedience are so immense that humans can't even conceive of them. His purpose with the Thessalonians was to get that point across, so the Thessalonians would endure. If they failed, then Paul considers that their efforts would have been "in vain." They would have tried to get this perspective across, and would have failed.

We see that Paul had no anxiety for his own physical wellbeing. When Timothy and Silas left him in Athens for his safety, he promptly started preaching about Christ and stirring up controversy, putting himself at risk (Acts 17). However, he did have anxiety about his spiritual children buckling under persecution, to be *tempted* to stop living faithfully to avoid rejection, difficulty, and loss.

Paul considered that his primary *labor* was to equip the saints there in Thessalonica to live by faith. It was not merely to get them birthed into God's family and then leave them alone. The initial faith in Jesus is just the new birth into Christ, the beginning of the believer's new spiritual life. Once we are born again, we are called to mature and become Christ-like throughout our lives, foremost by suffering as He did (Hebrews 2:10, 2 Timothy 3:12, Colossians 1:24). We are promised that our greatest fulfillment, the completion of who we were made to be, lies in laying down our lives in service to the cause of Christ, and enduring rejection from the world.

## **Biblical Text**

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