

***WAITING FOR THE LORD'S RETURN, PART 3:
"FAITH THAT ENDURES TO THE END"***
1 THESSALONIANS 2:17-3:13

Ps. Eric Yee

Personal Introduction

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God to us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 3 of our sermon series called "Waiting for the Lord's Return," where we're going through the Books of 1 & 2 Thessalonians together.

And today's sermon is titled: "Faith that Endures to the End."

I'll pray for us again before we jump in.

Sermon Introduction

What do parents desire *most* for their children?

According to a survey conducted in the U.S. by Pew Research Center last year among almost 4,000 parents with kids under age 18...

- Almost 90% of them prioritize *financial stability* and *job satisfaction* for their children.
- About two-thirds say it is "extremely important" to them that their children grow up to be *honest* and *ethical*.
- About half say the same about desiring their kids to be *hardworking*.
- And only 17% of parents said that it's "extremely important" for their children to have *similar religious beliefs*.¹

So it seems that, for most American parents, they desire financial stability, job satisfaction, honesty, and hard work *most* for their children—and *religious beliefs*—or *faith*—is a bit more of an afterthought.

If we were to conduct a similar survey among us here today, I wonder what we would say.

Parents, think to yourself: what is your greatest desire for your *children*?

¹ Rachel Minkin and Juliana Menasce Horowitz, "Parenting in America Today," Pew Research Center, January 24, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/01/24/parenting-in-america-today>.

And not just parents, but *members* of our church—this *spiritual family*—think to yourself: what is your greatest desire for *one another* in this church?

That's what we're going to explore more in today's passage.

The One Thing

As a spiritual family, may our greatest desire for one another be that our faith endure to the end.

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13.

Just want to give a bit of context before jumping into today's passage.

On his second missionary journey, Paul, Silvanus (also known as Silas), and Timothy shared the gospel of Jesus Christ in the city of Thessalonica, where many believed, and a church was planted.

But within just a few weeks, an angry mob of unbelieving Jews began persecuting the Thessalonian Christians, dragging them out of their homes and accusing them before the city officials.

As a result, Paul, Silas, and Timothy were urged to leave abruptly when the Thessalonian church was probably only about a month old (Acts 17:1-10).

And so, Paul writes this letter, which we know as 1 Thessalonians, to *encourage* this young Thessalonian church amidst afflictions to continue to grow in their faith and godliness in light of the hope that they have in Jesus' second coming.

And that's where we are in today's passage.

Scripture Reading

So let's read 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13 (ESV)

^{2:17} But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, ¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

^{3:1} Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction,

just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God,¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you,¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you,¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

This is God's Word.

Overview

We'll look at this passage in two parts.

- I. Paul's concern for the Thessalonians' faith (2:17-3:5)
- II. Paul's joy in the Thessalonians' faith (3:6-13)

I. Paul's concern for the Thessalonians' faith (2:17-3:5)

Look at chapter 2, verses 17-18.

^{2:17} But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face,¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.

Earlier in this chapter, Paul *defended* his ministry from those *slandering* him in Thessalonica. People were accusing him of being a *fraud* and not really *caring* about the Thessalonian Christians—and saying *that's why he's abandoned them*.²

² Regarding 1 Thessalonians 2:1-3:13, John Stott (*The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, rev. ed., BST [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021], 28-29) writes: "Paul's critics took full advantage of his sudden disappearance. In order to undermine his authority and his gospel, they determined to discredit him. So they launched a malicious smear campaign. By studying Paul's self-defence it is possible for us to reconstruct their slanders. 'He ran away,' they sneered, 'and hasn't been seen or heard of since. Obviously he's insincere, driven by the basest motives. He's just one more of those many phoney teachers who tramp up and down the Egnatian Way. In a word, he's a charlatan. He's in his job only for what he can get out of it in terms of sex, money, prestige or power. So when opposition arose, and he found himself in personal danger, he took to his heels and ran! He doesn't care about you Thessalonian disciples of his; he has abandoned you! He's much more concerned about his own skin than your welfare.'"

But Paul reminded them of how he cared for them “like a nursing *mother* taking care of her own children” (2:7), and “like a *father* with his children” (2:11).

And *here*, when it says, “we were *trn away* from you,” in the original Greek, it literally says, “we were *orphaned* from you.” So Paul continues this very *familial* language of affection. It was as if his spiritual *family* was being ripped apart.

And just like *any* parent would do if they felt violently *separated* from their children, Paul was trying to do all he could to see them again in person.

Therefore, all that the *slanderers* in Thessalonica were saying about Paul being a fraud and not really caring about the Thessalonians and abandoning them were *not* true at all.

Paul did *everything* he could to see them again, “but Satan hindered [them].” We don’t know *exactly* what that means, but he’ll mention Satan again in verse 5, so we’ll come back to this later.

<pause>

So *why* is it that Paul wanted to see the Thessalonian Christians so badly? What was his *aim* for seeing them?

Look at verses 19-20.

¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?

²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

Now, to understand this properly, we have to remember the language of *family* that Paul has been using throughout this chapter—“like a nursing *mother* taking care of her own children... like a *father* with his children... we were *orphaned* from you.”

So Paul sees himself as a spiritual *parent* and the young Thessalonian Christians as his spiritual *children*—as those who are still young in the faith and who still need much nurturing and guidance.

And essentially, Paul’s desire is to see his spiritual children in *heaven*. He wants to see their faith *endure* to the end—when the Lord Jesus returns. *That’s* his “hope.”

He *longs* for the Thessalonian Christians to make it to heaven—and as he imagines seeing them there, he will be *overjoyed* and beaming with *pride* as his spiritual children will be his “joy” and “crown of boasting.”

But this kind of “boasting” is *not* a bad kind of boasting. It’s like a father saying to his son, “I’m so proud of you.”

When I take pride in my kids, I’m not saying, “Look at how well I’ve parented my kids.” It’s not this self-centered kind of boasting. I’m not thinking that at all. When I say, “I’m so proud of you” to my children, it’s

a declaration of my *love* for them. I'm so happy to see them *maturing* and becoming the *men* that God made them to be—and I'm *rejoicing* with them in that.

And *that's* the kind of "boasting" we see here.

Paul's greatest desire for the Thessalonian Christians is that their faith would endure to the end—when the Lord Jesus returns.

And so, with the aim of seeing his spiritual children in *heaven*, he longs to see them even *now* in person, so that he may *help* them get there by holding fast to their faith in Christ.

<pause>

I think nearly every parent knows this kind of heart that Paul is exuding here. Generally speaking, parents *desire* their children to be secure and happy—and they try to help them get there in the way that they think is best.

That's why parents try to give their kids the best education to secure the best job, in order to be financially secure, to live a comfortable life, to get married, to have kids, to live a long and healthy and happy life.

But whereas many parents want their children to be secure and happy in *this* life, Paul wants his spiritual children to be *eternally* secure and happy in the life *to come*. "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:26; cf. Mark 8:36).

And so, Paul looked forward to the coming of our Lord Jesus, where he could say to his spiritual children, "You have fought the good fight. You have finished the race. You have kept the faith. And I'm so proud of you" (cf. 2 Tim. 4:6-8).

There's nothing wrong with desiring good things for our children in *this* life, but those should never be *ultimate*—as if they were *the* "hope" that we hold out to our kids. Our desire for our children should be nothing less than their *eternal* security and happiness in the life to come.

<pause>

Now, parents—is that your greatest desire for your children? Is it that you'll see them in heaven? If so, is that communicated to them and evidenced in what you talk to them about and in the everyday routines of your family?

If you're a Christian, I'm sure you would say that seeing your kids in heaven is your greatest desire, but it's easy to *assume* that we're bringing up our children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4), and not *actually* be doing that as well as we might think.

It's easy to get short-sighted and keep conversations about our kids to be about their sleep schedule, whether they're eating well, what school to send them to, what activities to get them involved in, and so forth.

These are not bad conversations to have, but if our *greatest* desire is to see our kids in *heaven*, if we are fixing our eyes on our Lord's return, shouldn't our discussions with our spouse and with other parents in our church be filled more with conversations about how to go about imparting *faith* in Jesus Christ to our kids?

- "How does your family do family worship?"
- "What are some good, age-appropriate Bible storybooks and Bibles that you're using with your kids?"
- "What are good Christian books to read with them to talk about marriage, gender, death, heaven, conscience, guilt and shame, and so forth?"
- "How do you speak to their hearts when they're complaining and throwing a tantrum?"
- "How can we help our teens take greater ownership of their faith?"
- "How can we guide our older kids in thinking through their doubts, insecurities, and questions?"

These are the kinds of conversations that I think parents should be having with their *wives* and with *others* in the church.

Very practically, if you're a parent...

- Talk to your spouse about how to impart faith to your children this week.
- Talk to other parents in our church later after Sunday Celebration.
- [Check out the "Resources for Parents" page on our church website.]
- [Sign-up for our ongoing Parenting Class, and stay after Sunday Celebration today for Part 4: Getting to the Heart of Behavior.]

At the end of the day, we know that each person is saved by God's *grace* alone and through their personal *faith* in *Christ* alone, but we also know that God often uses the *ordinary* means of grace to *nurture* faith in our children, for Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it."

This isn't a *promise*, but it's a *proverb* that reveals how God *generally* works in our world. So we want to do all we can to *help* our children believe and hold fast to faith in Christ.

<pause>

Now, parenting is a *specific* application point, but in *general*, we're not just helping our *children*, but as a *spiritual family*, we're all called to help *one another* to have our faith endure to the end, so that we can see *all* of us in heaven on that final day when the Lord returns.

That should be our desire for every member in our church, just as it was Paul's desire for every member of the Thessalonian church. And it wasn't just a *desire*, but it was a *concern* that moved him to *act*.

Look at chapter 3, verses 1-5.

^{3:1} Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.]

From Acts 17, we can get a bit more context. After Paul, Silas, and Timothy were driven out of Thessalonica, they came to the nearby city of Berea, where they *again* preached the gospel, and another church was planted. But *again*, the unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica came and drove Paul out of Berea. So Paul went to Athens, and later, Timothy and Silas joined him there.

And *all* this time, even after planting *another* church in Berea, Paul and his companions have *not* forgotten the fledgling church in Thessalonica. They are not “out of sight, out of mind” for them, but they have been in their mind and “heart” throughout that time (2:17).

In fact, later in 2 Corinthians 11, Paul details all the *afflictions* that he's gone through—being imprisoned, beaten, whipped, stoned, shipwrecked, sleepless, hungry and thirsty, and in constant danger. But after naming *all* those afflictions, he names the *pinnacle* of his afflictions in...

2 Corinthians 11:28 = And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Paul could endure beatings and imprisonments, but what concerned him the *most* was how all the churches were doing—and he felt that on a “daily” basis. What was the state of their faith? Would they endure to the end? Would he see them in heaven when the Lord Jesus returns?

^{3:1} Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

So for the Thessalonian Christians, Paul is anxious and worried that they might be believing the lies of the slanderers, giving in to the affliction of persecution, and falling for Satan's temptations—and that they may be *wavering* in their faith, or perhaps even *forsaking* their faith in Christ altogether.

So while in Athens, when Paul and his companions could “bear it no longer,” they sent Timothy back to Thessalonica “to learn about [their] faith” (3:5).

Note that they weren’t just thinking, “I wonder how they’re doing” and then stop there. It wasn’t “out of sight, out of mind” for them, but it was “out of sight, *still* in mind.” And so, he *wrote* to them and sent *Timothy* to them. And later we’ll see that he *prayed* “night and day” for them (3:10).

<pause>

Now, for us, I wonder... is this *our* hearts for *one another*, especially for brothers and sisters in our *spiritual family* that we haven’t seen gather with us in a while? Are we *so concerned* for the state of their faith, and whether or not we’ll see them in heaven, that there comes a point when we can “bear it no longer” and we *have* to act?

It’s natural for our default to be “out of sight, out of mind.” Therefore, it requires *intentional* effort for us to become more “out of sight, *still* in mind” kind of people.

Very practically, Paul and his companions *prayed* for them regularly, and so they were constantly in their mind and heart, and it likely *grew* their *love* for them, which made them *pray* for them even more—and when they could “bear it no longer,” they *reached out* to them through Timothy and this letter.

And for us, this is probably as one-to-one as we can get in our application. If you’re a member of our church, I urge you to make it a regular habit of *praying* through our members’ directory. In fact, you don’t even have to open up the members’ directory because we send out 10 names and faces of our members each week in our members WhatsApp group, encouraging us to pray for two members a day. *That* is one of the most *practical* ways to continue to keep our fellow brothers and sisters “in sight” and “in mind.”

And you don’t need to pray *long* prayers for each member, but I’d encourage you to just pray 30 seconds for them in light of what you read in God’s Word. Later, we’ll see Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians in verses 11-13, and when we read it out loud, it’s *less* than 30 seconds. It’s not the *length* of your prayer, but it’s the *concern* that you have for your fellow brothers and sisters, and whether through long or short prayers, God will work in *our* hearts and *theirs* as we regularly *pray* for them.

Also, just think about your own family for a moment. If your brother or sister goes missing in your *immediate* family—and nobody has heard from them for some time—would you not be *concerned* for them? Would you not message, call, and try to get a hold of them somehow? I hope so—and that’s no different in the family of *God*.

Now, especially if you have an *existing* relationship with a brother or sister in our spiritual family whom we haven’t seen gather with us in a while, I urge you to not just *pray* for them but to personally *reach out* to them. Message them, call them, and try to meet them in person to “learn about [their] faith” and to encourage them to gather again with their spiritual family.

As brothers and sisters of *this* spiritual family, if our greatest desire for one another is that our faith endure to the end, then we ought to be concerned for each other's faith, and whether or not we'll see each other in heaven, especially when we haven't seen our brothers and sisters for some time now.

If some names come to mind right now, I pray that you will reach out to them later today.

<pause>

Now, look at verses 2 and 3. Paul and Silas sent Timothy, their "brother and God's coworker in the *gospel* of Christ, to *establish* and *exhort* [the Thessalonian Christians] in [their] faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions."

So for us, how do you think your faith will *endure* through afflictions? What do you think you need *most* in order for your faith to endure to the end? According to verses 2 and 3, it needs to be more "established" (or rooted) and continually "exhorted" (or strongly encouraged) in the gospel of Christ.

If you want your faith to *endure* through afflictions, then we need *more* than just someone to listen and affirm and cry with us. Now, to be clear, I think those things are very *important* for us to do—to learn the practice of presence, to listen and understand the other person well, to sit with them in their pain—and we want to definitely *start* there. But ultimately, we want to lead them to the truth of God's Word.

Timothy likely listened and understood and empathized well as he came to be with the Thessalonian Christians *in person*—but he also understood that what the Thessalonian Christians needed *most* was God's Word. They needed to be more firmly established, rooted, exhorted, and encouraged by the truth of the gospel. *That's* the primary reason that Timothy was sent.

And what is the gospel?

It's that God created us in love, but we've all strayed away from him in our sin, and we rightfully deserve eternal punishment for our sin. But thank God it wasn't "out of sight, out of mind" for him. He wasn't ok with us continuing to stray farther away from him. But he was genuinely concerned for our eternal well-being, and he reached out to us and pursued after us personally, even coming from heaven to earth as the person of Jesus Christ to be our substitute—to suffer the worst afflictions in this life, to bear the eternal punishment we deserved on the cross, and to resurrect three days later.

So now, all who repent of their sins and believe in him as Lord and Savior are forgiven their sins and will one day be resurrected to enjoy the new heavens and new earth, where there is no more sin or death or suffering, when he returns to restore all things at the end of the age.

The more we are established and exhorted in that gospel, the more our faith can *endure* afflictions.

In fact, if we are followers of Christ, verse 3 says we are “destined” for afflictions in this life, for Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). Of course, our cross is not anywhere close to the cross that *Christ* bore on *our* behalf, but we follow the same pattern of life as our Savior—the cross before the crown, humiliation before exaltation, suffering and death before resurrection and eternal life.

In verse 4, Paul says that he and his companions “kept telling [them] beforehand that we were to suffer affliction.” Or as Peter says in...

1 Peter 4:12-13 = Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

If you understand the gospel more deeply, not only will you *not* be *surprised* when afflictions come, but you will not be *shaken* by them. Rather, your faith will be *strengthened* as you cling to the hope you have in Christ and *rejoice* in the glory that is to be revealed when he returns.

[^{3:1} Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.]

But Paul knows that this kind of response to afflictions is *not* automatic for Christians. That’s *why* he *taught* and *modeled*—and that’s *why* he is sending Timothy to *continue* to teach and model—for them such a response as we hold *firmly* to the gospel.

And if you look at verse 5, we see that just as Paul’s *greatest* desire for the Thessalonian Christians is that their faith will *endure* to the end, we also have an *enemy*—Satan, “the tempter”—whose greatest desire for us is that our faith will *not* endure to the end.

Satan will try to take advantage of our afflictions, emotions, and temperaments to tempt us to forsake our faith in Christ.³

He will try to keep us away from the church, so that we might *not* be more rooted and encouraged in our faith. We already saw in chapter 2, verse 18, how Satan continually “hindered” Paul and his companions from being with the Thessalonian church.

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965], 19) says: “The devil [is] the adversary of our souls. He can use our temperaments and our physical condition. He so deals with us that we allow our temperament to control and govern us, instead of keeping temperament where it should be kept. There is no end to the ways the devil produces spiritual depression. We must always bear him in mind.”

Again, we don't know exactly *how* Satan did that, but let me just say that, if you're a Christian, the desire to *not* gather with a gospel-proclaiming church is *satanic*. I know that sounds strong, but that's actually what it is. It is definitely *not* from our Lord who bled, died, and resurrected to establish and make us part of his church (Eph. 2:11-22), and it definitely doesn't fit the pattern of God's design for Christians to be members of local churches that we see throughout the NT.

Here, Satan is called "the tempter" for he has been doing that ever since the Garden when he tempted Adam and Eve to fall into sin. He tries to convince us that sin will satisfy us more than Christ. He's like the fisherman who holds out bait to fish but hides the hook. He's like the kidnapper who holds out candy to children, only to grab and enslave them.

Satan is also called the "father of lies" (John 8:44). He is the perpetual slanderer in our ears, saying things like...

- "Those in the church don't really care about you," or
- "You're only a Christian because you grew up in a Christian environment, so you need to leave Christianity and discover the truth for yourself," or
- "God doesn't care about you amidst all your afflictions; in fact, all your afflictions proves that either God isn't good or he doesn't exist at all," or
- "There are other more pressing and urgent things that you need to attend to with work and family, and it's all on you to figure it out; you're far too busy to spend time with God and your spiritual family."

These and *many more* are the lies that Satan constantly whispers into our ears to deceive us.

The name "Satan" itself means "accuser." He not only *tempts* us and *deceives* us, but he'll quickly turn around and *accuse* us. He'll lie to you about what will satisfy you, he'll tempt you to sin, and as soon as you do, he'll overwhelm you with his accusations—"How could God love you now? What will others think of you now? You might as well just indulge in this sin because there's no turning back now. You're not worthy of God's forgiveness. You're a hypocrite if you go to church, read the Bible, pray, or sing worship songs. You need to escape your shame by avoiding your spiritual family and finding people who will never talk to you about your faith."

Satan is *not* your friend; he is the master *deceiver*, *accuser*, and *tempter*. And to remember his schemes, you can think of the acronym DAT (D-A-T) as in "*Dat's* the devil."⁴

- D: he *deceives* (or lies).
- A: he *accuses*.
- T: he *tempts*.

Now, think to yourself: how might you be succumbing to some of Satan's schemes? How might he be deceiving you, tempting you, and accusing you?

⁴ Gerry Breshears, "Demonic Attacks" (lecture, Spiritual Warfare from Biblical Training), <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/learn/academy/th251-spiritual-warfare/demonic-attacks-th251-19>.

Satan never acts for our good; his greatest desire is to steal, kill, and destroy our faith in Christ (John 10:10), and thus to see us destroyed eternally in hell with him.

And he *especially* capitalizes on our afflictions. When there's conflict in the family, loved ones getting sick, feelings of loneliness in your singleness or aimlessness at work, financial insecurity, relational strife, mental health struggles, and other afflictions, he will do *everything* he can to cause you spiritual, physical, and eternal *harm* by attacking your *faith* in Christ—to have you turn *away* from God rather than *towards* him.

So amidst all the slanderous lies, the suffering of afflictions, and the schemes of Satan, Paul *fears* that the Thessalonians' faith would not *endure* to the end—that when Jesus returns, he would not see the Thessalonians there with him in heaven.

<pause>

So first, Paul's *concern* for the Thessalonians' faith; and second...

II. Paul's joy in the Thessalonians' faith (3:6-13)

Look at verses 6-10.

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

After Paul sent Timothy out of great concern for the Thessalonians' faith, Timothy now comes back with “the good news of [their] faith and love and reported that [they] always remember [Paul and his companions] kindly and long to see them, as [Paul and his companions] long to see [them].”

And having received this “good news,” Paul basically *explodes* with joy.

In verse 6, the term “good news” here is literally “gospel”—and this is the *only* time that Paul uses the term “gospel” for anything other than the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁵ This is over-the-top language.

Paul is saying, “To hear of your faith and love and steadfastness in following Christ amidst all the slanderous lies, suffering of persecution, and schemes of Satan—it's like hearing the *gospel* to me.”

In verse 7, Paul describes his *concern* for the Thessalonians' faith as “distress and affliction,” but now, he says that they are “*comforted* about [them] through [their] faith.” They're *relieved*. “Thank God you guys are still Christians! Thank God you guys are still following Jesus!”

⁵ Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, TNTC (Nottingham, England: IVP, 2009), 72.

Have you ever known this kind of relief?

- Perhaps you thought you failed an exam, but then were relieved to find out that you passed.
- Perhaps your loved one had a medical check-up, and the doctor said that they needed to do more tests to see if this might be late-stage cancer—and then finally, after days of anxious waiting for the results, you are overwhelmed with relief as you hear the news that it's not the cancer that you feared it was.

That's the kind of relief that Paul felt, except Paul's relief goes so much *further*. He thought he may have lost his spiritual children to Satan and hell, but then he heard the news that they're still safe in Jesus and that they're still on their way to heaven. There's no greater relief he could know.

And in verse 8, he says, "now we live." I mean, this is *really* over-the-top language. It's not like Paul was *dead* before, but he was *so down* with his *concerns* for the Thessalonians' faith. But now that he knows that they're "standing fast in the Lord," he's saying, "Now, I feel *alive* again! I'm not bogged down anymore. I feel overjoyed! I'm so happy!"

And in verse 9, he says, "what *thanksgiving* can we return to God for you, for all the *joy* that we feel for your sake before our God?" This is clearly a *rhetorical* question, and he's basically saying, "We cannot thank God enough. There's no amount of *thanksgiving* we can give to God that can match the level of *joy* that we feel right now."

But in all this, notice the *source* of Paul's joy is their *enduring faith*—it's the good news (or gospel) of their *faith*, he's comforted about them through their *faith*, he now *lives* because they are standing fast in the Lord by *faith*. *That's* why he *explodes* in joy and thanksgiving.

<pause>

Now, is *this* what we *thank* God for? "I thank God that my fellow brothers and sisters are standing firm in the faith. I thank God that in all the trials that they are experiencing, they're not bitter, but they're actually turning to *God* and standing fast in their *faith* in him." Are we *overjoyed* that our brothers and sisters are standing in their *faith* like that?

Does this resonate with you in any way? Or does this sound very strange to you?

Perhaps some of us have *no idea* what this is like.

I think it's important to understand that the *only* way you could actually feel this way is if you care *deeply* for your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. You would *not* feel that kind of overwhelming joy for people you don't care much about.

If you hear that someone you don't know well is now cancer free, you wouldn't explode with joy because you wouldn't have been as concerned for them to begin with. But if this was your loved one whom you care deeply for, I'd imagine we would be flooded with joy.

The level of joy we feel for one another is linked to the level of care we have for one another.

<pause>

So the next question to ask ourselves is this: Are we investing in each other's lives enough where we have this kind of affection for one another?

Just look at this language of love and affection that Paul uses for the Thessalonian Christians all throughout this passage: Paul felt “torn away” (or *orphaned*) from them (2:17), he had a “great desire” to see them face to face (2:17), “when *we* could bear it no longer” (3:1), “when *I* could bear it no longer” (3:5), “we long to see you” (3:6), “we have been comforted about you” (3:7), “now we live” (3:8), “all the joy that we feel for your sake” (3:9).

It almost makes us *uncomfortable to hear* such words of affection, let alone *express* those kinds of words of affection for one another.

<pause>

But *how* did *Paul* develop such love and affection for the Thessalonians Christians—and how did the *Thessalonians* develop such love and affection for Paul?

Now, we could talk about their time spent together, shared afflictions, and constant prayers for one another, but I want to focus on their *shared faith* in Christ that made them a *spiritual family*.

I think perhaps why some of us *don't* have this kind of love and affection for one another—and therefore, why we *don't* have this kind of *joy* at one another's *enduring faith* amidst afflictions—is because we don't *truly* regard one another as *brothers and sisters* in Christ, but just some acquaintances who happen to be in the same church.

Do you *really* see your fellow members in this church as your *brothers and sisters*?

Whether you've grown up in the church or not, perhaps this is *not* what many of us *think* about or have been *taught* about church—that we're a spiritual family—and how that should radically *shape* how we approach *relationships* with one another.

This is what God's Word says that we *are*—and God calls us to *live into* who we are together.

<pause>

Now, perhaps some of us don't *feel* like church is spiritual family, and we get jaded and numb to the idea of church being a spiritual family because we feel the gap between what we read in the Bible and what we're experiencing now.

But we *have* to understand that this sense of spiritual family doesn't just *naturally* happen. And rather than give up in disappointment, how can we continue to move in the right *direction* towards what God's Word says we *are*? How can we begin to *bridge* the gap to become a church that *feels* more like a family?

Perhaps you can stick around after Sunday Celebration to talk, pray, and eat with one another. Perhaps you can invite people over your place for a meal or grab coffee with people who work near you. Perhaps you could *join* a Life Group as a place to start building relationships with other members in the church.

Or perhaps we need to correct our *expectations* of what a church family *really* is. If you think about a *family*, sometimes siblings couldn't be more *different*, yet they *love* one another as family. Perhaps one sibling is your stereotypical *jock*, who loves playing and watching sports; and another sibling is your stereotypical *bookworm*, who loves reading books and prefers not to go outside. They couldn't be more *different*. They *naturally* don't understand each other, and they might not *naturally* want to spend time with each other, yet *because* they are family, they *learn* to love and appreciate one another as members in the same family.

That's essentially what the *church* family is supposed to be. As a spiritual family, we ought to *expect* living with brothers and sisters who couldn't be more *different* than us, who *naturally* don't understand us, who we may not *naturally* want to spend time with, yet *because* we are spiritual *family*, we're going to *learn* to love and appreciate one another as members in this family.

Also, the reality is that *every* family fights, and yet they *stick* it out together; they don't just *leave* and find a *new* family.

If you have a fight in a social club, you can just *avoid* the person, but that's *not* what families do—at least not *healthy* ones. You live with your family, you see them day-in and day-out, so you seek to listen, understand, own up to wrongs, apologize, forgive, reconcile, and experience *deeper* and *stronger* relationships with one another as a result.

Yes, to be a spiritual family and to truly regard one another as brothers and sisters is *hard*. And maybe other churches don't emphasize this, but *this* is what we see in God's Word. And so, we want to follow God's design, and trust that he honors those who seek to honor him in living out his Word (1 Sam. 2:30; John 12:26).

<pause>

Now, if you're a Christian and you've been to our church or other gospel-proclaiming churches for months or even years now, and yet *still* haven't become a member here or at another local church—and you don't have any intention to do so anytime soon—I want you to ask yourself, "Why not?"

Whereas Paul feels "torn away"—or *orphaned*—from his spiritual family, you're intentionally *choosing* to live as a spiritual orphan. If you're not a member of any local family of God, you are functionally living as an orphan. And there is no paradigm for that in the New Testament.

You don't need to join *our* church, but as a Christian, you ought to join *a* local gospel-proclaiming church somewhere near you, where you are known and where others know you, and where your greatest desire for one another is that your faith endure to the end. That is God's design for his church—that every Christian not only know him as heavenly Father but who truly know one another as brothers and sisters in his spiritual family.

So if you're a Christian and not yet part of a local church, please come talk to me or other members in our church, and we'd be happy to discuss any questions you may have. I'd also encourage you to sign-up for the next Experiencing Membership class here or at another church to learn more about church membership, and then join yourself to a local spiritual family to experience and commit to developing the kind of family culture that we read about in God's Word.

<pause>

So, going back, after hearing the good news about the Thessalonians' faith, Paul doesn't just *say* that he's rejoicing and praying for them "most earnestly night and day," but he bursts out in prayer for them right there and then.

Look at verses 11-13.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Paul prays that God would direct their way to them—to be able to see them in person again—and that the Lord would make them "increase and abound in love for one another and for all."

Interesting, he just heard the good news of their *faith* and *love*, and yet he prays that they may be supplied what is *lacking* in their faith (3:10), and that they may "*increase and abound* in love for one another" (3:12).

We never stop *growing* in our faith in Christ and our love for one another. We continually need to be "established and exhorted in our faith" through God's Word and we continually need to "increase and abound in love" through deeper relationships with one another.

And notice what the *reason* or *purpose* is for why Paul prays that their "love for one another and for all" would increase and abound even more—"so that [God] may establish [their] hearts blameless in holiness ... at the coming of our Lord Jesus."

There is a connection between growing *love* for others and growing in *holiness*. Growing relationships of love are the *context* for growing in holiness. In other words, you cannot be holy in isolation. You cannot grow in character without being in relationship with others.

Think of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). You cannot grow in love, kindness, and gentleness by yourself? You need the context of *others* to be loving, kind, and gentle *towards*.

There's really no escaping this. God calls us to be holy as *he* is holy and as he has *made* us holy in Christ. And if we are to grow in that holiness, we need to be in the context of growing relationships of love with one another—as a spiritual family.

And so, *this* is what Paul *prays* for. He *never* prays that God takes away afflictions, but even in the midst of afflictions, he prays for greater *faith* in God, increasing *love* for one another, progressive *holiness* in our lives, and steadfast *hope* in the Lord's return.

And again, notice that Paul says, “at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all the saints.” This ties back to chapter 2, verses 19 and 20. Paul never takes his eyes off of that day of the Lord Jesus' return and desiring to see all his spiritual children with him there—blameless, spotless, and holy as Christ made them to be.

Now is *this* what we pray for as we pray for our brothers and sisters? If, as a spiritual family, our greatest desire for one another is that our faith would endure to the end, then *these* are the kinds of things that we ought to be praying for one another more and more.

Conclusion

As we close, some of you may know that my family and I will be going on a 6-month sabbatical next month. It's the first one we've ever taken after being here in Indonesia for 14 years. And we're also a bit anxious for our church while we'll be away. Of course, we trust that Jeff will lead the church well while we're away, and ultimately that God is the chief shepherd of his church (1 Pet. 5:4), and he will build his church whether we're here or not.

But how will we come back to find our church?

Will we come back to find that Satan has successfully deceived, accused and tempted our members, to the point where they are believing lies and accusations about God, themselves, and one another—and are now choosing to stray and sin, especially amidst their afflictions?

Or by the truth of God's Word, by the grace of our Lord Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and by our loving concern for one another, when my family and I come back in the new year, will we find that your faith in Christ has endured, your love for one another has abounded, and your hope in our Lord's return has remained steadfast?

I pray that it will be the latter. The kinds of prayers that Paul is praying for the Thessalonian church are the kinds of prayers that I am praying for our church, and the kinds of prayers I desire more and more that we would be praying for one another.

I shared at our last Members' Meeting that one of the best ways to support us and the church while we're away is to maintain the *unity* of our spiritual family,

While we're away, and even now while we're all waiting for the Lord's return, I know that one of the most effective ways that Satan will try to destroy our church is by *eroding* the unity in our spiritual family.

[But regardless of my sabbatical, even here in Tangerang/Jakarta Satan wants to destroy the unity of this spiritual family.]

And so, I want to call all of us to be extra vigilant to not fall prey to that

So pray for one another, pursue those you haven't seen in a while, share hard times and high times with each other, persevere in love for one another, point each other back to the gospel and the truth of God's Word, and help one another keep the faith and endure to the end.

The One Thing

***As a spiritual family, may our greatest desire for one another be
that our faith endure to the end.***

Let's pray.