



1 Thessalonians

Christian Conduct & The Lord's Return

1 Thessalonians 3:1–5

August 14, 2013

Introduction

One of the accusations Paul's opponents had made against him was that he had virtually abandoned the Thessalonians after his departure. In defending himself against these false charges, Paul had already discussed his motives and conduct in chapter 2. Now we will see the specific ways in which he cared for the spiritual well-being of the Thessalonians by sending Timothy.

The Solution for Paul's Continuing Absence (3:1–10)

Before we consider the charge of Paul abandoning his ministry to the Thessalonians, we need to first consider what a proper ministry should look like. Paul already gave us a blueprint for his ministry while in Thessalonica (2:1–16), and now he will do the same for a ministry of visitation.

The Sending of Timothy (3:1–5)

Paul had mentioned his personal desire to come and visit the Thessalonians, but Satan had prevented him from doing so (2:17–18). In lieu of a personal visit, he sent the next best thing — Timothy, his trusted and faithful companion in the gospel ministry. But beyond making a simple social call, this visit had a ministerial purpose.

The Circumstances behind Sending Timothy (vv. 1–2a)

Verse 1 begins with “therefore,” pointing back to 2:17–20 and Paul's continuing desire to see the Thessalonians. We may ask ourselves, “Why was Paul so concerned?” The answer is threefold: 1) There was an abrupt and hurried manner to his departure; 2) The good news of the gospel had become something of bad news for the Thessalonians because of the persecution that had been transferred to them; and 3) Paul wanted to continue his ministry among them.

After Paul's departure from Thessalonica, his travels had taken him to Berea and then on to Athens (Acts 17:10–34). Eventually Paul's agony

and concern over his departure from Thessalonica reached a breaking point, so he took action. The solution his team came to was to send Timothy back to Thessalonica while Paul and Silas remained in Athens. But Paul's sending of Timothy was not some sort of consolation prize. Paul set forth Timothy's credentials as his election (he was a brother) and identifies him as God's instrument, specifically with regard to the gospel ministry. He was also a personal representative of Paul and had the authority to act on the apostle's behalf (1 Tim 4:4–16).

The Purpose for Sending Timothy (vv. 2b–5)

Throughout chapter 3, Paul gives several purpose verbs for Timothy's visit. They are:

- 1) To *establish/strengthen* concerning your faith (v. 2)
- 2) To *encourage/comfort* concerning your faith (v. 2)
- 3) To *know* your faith (v. 5)
- 4) To *see* your face (v. 10)
- 5) To *perfect* what is lacking in your faith (v. 10)
- 6) To *establish* your hearts blameless in holiness (v. 13)

Together these verbs give an excellent roadmap for purposeful ministerial visitation. In this study, we will examine the first three of these. The first two verbs are tied to the Thessalonians' faith. Faith in this sense is used *objectively* and refers to the entire body of Christian doctrine. Timothy's task was to strengthen them in the faith through teaching, and in doing so to also encourage them in the face of persecution.

In verse 3 Paul conveys the same idea, but states it in the negative. Timothy's purpose was to establish their faith, so no one would be shaken by these afflictions. The idea is that Paul's opponents will take advantage of these persecutions the Thessalonians are experiencing and cause them to follow false teachers. We see the same warning in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 where Paul warns them not to be shaken in persecution. These false teachers were claiming that the Day of the Lord judgments were upon them and they had missed the rapture. This was patently false, but the idea could be twisted to fit the circumstances (cf. 1 Thess 5). Paul's point here is that persecutions and the trials of life are a necessary part of a believer's salvation and sanctification. They are integrally entwined with God's decree of salvation. Consider Paul's statement in Acts 14:22, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." These trials and

afflictions result in the sanctification of God's children and are an expression of love (James 1:2–8; Heb 12:7–10; 1 Pet 1:6–7; 4:17–19; 2 Tim 3:12)!

In verse 4, Paul again calls on the Thessalonian believers to recall what he had previously taught. He had repeatedly warned them beforehand that they would suffer persecution. In a sense, this was a prophecy which was fulfilled in very short order! These persecutions coupled with Paul's absence and concern for them eventually became too much for the apostle to bear. This was not a failure on Paul's part, but rather an example of love that was motivated to action! At the beginning of verse 5 he again repeats the sentiment from verse 1 to remind them of the great emotional turmoil that brought about this visit from Timothy. We also see our next purpose verb here.

Timothy was sent to *know* or *find out* about their faith. In other words, he was sent to discover whether or not they had persevered in the faith. In this verse faith is used in the *subjective* sense, meaning it pertains to an individual's personal faith. Paul was concerned that Satan had somehow come and tempted them to forsake the Christian faith. If this were so, it would have given evidence that the Thessalonians had never truly accepted the gospel in the first place; and hence, Paul's ministry efforts would have been in vain. This verse provides us with some clear instruction regarding the doctrine of perseverance. True gospel ministry is not merely concerned with professions of faith, but more so seeing lasting fruit produced in the lives of believers. If a person's life is not yielding a crop of righteous fruit, it is giving evidence that there was no conversion to begin with. This does *not* mean a person is saved by works! Rather, it means that all true believers will persevere in their personal subjective faith and produce the godly fruits of righteousness (Gal 5:22–23).

Conclusion

Paul's concern was that Satan had led astray those he ministered to in Thessalonica. Thankfully this was not the case! But all too often today, many Christians are willing to settle for thinking that if a person makes a profession of faith, they are out of danger. Paul would say, "Check the fruit first!" Paul's ministry went beyond checking off numbers of "salvations." He showed personal concern for souls that lasted through the entirety of his and their lifetimes!

~AWB