

A Shepherd's Love in Action

By David Harrell

Bible Text: 1 Thessalonians 3:1-10
Preached on: Sunday, February 7, 2016

What a privilege it is for me to be able to stand before you by God's grace and preach his word to you. I pray that it will go forth with clarity and conviction this morning. We find ourselves in 1 Thessalonians 3. If you haven't been with us, we are going verse-by-verse as we typically do through this epistle and here we are going to see a shepherd's love in action. I have found over the years that many misunderstand the role and the purpose of a pastor and the church, in fact, in these days of mounting apostasy so evident in neo-evangelicalism, a pastor is often perceived by his congregation to be little more than the president and CEO of a religious social club who gives witty, humorous, and short inspirational talks. Underscore the word "short," right? He must be biblical, people will say, however, for most people, as long as a pastor supports what he says with a Bible verse, he's biblical, but too often the Bible verses are merely supporting what he believes and what he says rather than the Bible informing what he believes and what he says. The vast majority of professing Christians, I have discovered, understand very little of Scripture. There is very little spiritual discernment these days. Most people will say that the pastor must be winsome, he must be kind, he must be culturally relevant, whatever that means. He must be spiritual which is really an amorphous term that basically means politically, religiously correct and so on and so forth. Most churchgoers have very little contact with their pastor and if they are asked to define biblically according to the New Testament the qualifications, the role, the purpose of a pastor and even of a church, you will find that their answers are shockingly unbiblical.

Recently I was informed of a Facebook page that allows local residents in our community a forum to seek information and so I typed in, as I was told to do, "recommend a church." And up came all kinds of things and it was mainly what I found, mainly lonely women in need of friendship and child care and support groups for various things that they were dealing with, and the common key words and themes that they used really revealed the priorities of most people who were looking for a church today. They wanted nontraditional music; they wanted it to be nondenominational; not heavily indoctrinated, in other words, they don't like Bible doctrine because that's divisive. They want it to be friendly, tolerant, welcoming to all, active in community service, and a big thing that was common, casual dress. That's really important these days. But the biggest thing of all that they wanted is: programs for our kids. So naturally, most churches cater to those kinds of felt needs and I'm not saying that all of those are bad and the responses of the churches were basically, "Oh, we do that, and here's how we do that." Plus like one church says, "We have free movie night on Fridays with free popcorn." Another one, "We have Jazzercise for women. Unlimited workouts to get that tush transformation."

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So you get an idea. That's kind of the mindset of people in churches today. I didn't hear anybody, I did not read anyone that said, "I am looking for a church that helps satisfy my longing for the glory and the greatness of God. I'm looking for a church that will help me better know and serve him. I'm looking for a church that is uncompromising in its preaching and its teaching and the application of the word; a church that is unashamed of the Gospel. I'm looking for a church committed to making disciples and teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded. I'm looking for a church that is committed to purity and to holiness; a church that will have shepherds that will help me and my family become more conformed into the image of Christ." You just don't see any of that. So naturally, most churches aren't concerned about any of that.

Well, I use these examples to provide a stark contrast to what we see here before us with respect to the church at Thessalonica, what was going on with these people, what was going on in the heart of the pastor as we see his love in action, and certainly, this is very informative to me as a pastor. You know, Paul tells us that, "I want you to imitate me as I imitate Christ," and you'll find that this is very informative to you because it applies ultimately to all of us. And young people, I especially want you to listen to this because you are living in an age that really distorts the role and the purpose and even the qualifications of a pastor, the role and the purpose of a church. Most professing Christians are ignorant of these things. I saw a young pastor the other day wearing a shirt and in large letters on the back it said, "Pastor, because hard core devil stomping ninja isn't an official job title." "Pastor" in red, and then in white letters or in black letters, "because hard core devil stomping ninja isn't an official job title." It was just so sad when I read that. I almost wept. I felt so sorry for the young man and I literally sincerely prayed that God would show him the staggering ignorance and arrogance behind such a statement. Now, think of the difference of the Apostle Paul who described himself as the greatest of all sinners; who described himself as a slave of Christ; a disposable earthen vessel; a clay pot that held the glory of the Gospel so that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves.

Well, we return here to 1 Thessalonians 3 and we're going to be looking at verses 1 through 10 where we have an opportunity to really peer into the soul of the Apostle Paul, and here we have really a standard for every pastor and every person who belongs to Christ. What we're going to see is that because of his great love for Christ, he had a great love for those who belonged to Christ, and in the case of these Thessalonian saints that he and Silas had led to Christ and nurtured for a few short months before they had to flee, we see Paul's love in action. And here we are going to see four spiritual virtues that we would all do well to emulate. 1. He had a selfless commitment to their spiritual growth. Secondly, he had a longing to fellowship with them. Thirdly, he had a deep gratitude for

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God's grace in their lives. And finally, he had a disciplined devotion to pray for opportunities to minister to them.

So let's look at these things closely. Notice verse 1 of chapter 3, "Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone." Now, I want you to notice first how we have some insight here into how Paul discerned the will of God for his life. I'm sure some of you are questioning that right now in your life; you want to know what God would have you do about a particular situation. Now, we know that on some occasions, God would speak to Paul in times of crisis through visions. God does not do that today but he did then in that era for various reasons. We saw that, for example, at Paul's conversion when Christ spoke to him, when God spoke to him in a magnificent way so that he could see who Christ really was. And we saw it, as well, when Paul was struggling in Corinth and the Lord basically told him, "Don't leave. I want you to stay here because there are still some of my elect in this region that need to hear the Gospel and be saved." He also spoke to Paul, you will recall, in a night dream when he saw a man from Macedonia summoning him to come over and to help. But even before he left for Europe, we know that Paul discussed these matters with the other disciples. He wanted to make sure that that vision was from God and not from Satan and so forth.

So here we see Paul having a very important decision to make, "Should I remain in Athens alone or should I keep Timothy and perhaps Silas here with me?" Now, we believe that Paul was struggling with illness here in Athens. He was in constant danger. This was a city that was filled with profound daemonic influence because of all the idolatry, so it would have been very helpful for him to have Timothy and Silas stay with him, to come and to be with him, but he says, "But we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone." By the way, as a footnote, he uses the plural pronoun "we" rather than "I" as a humble way to refer to himself. This text in terms of the context and other passages indicate that Paul was in Athens alone.

Now, how did he make his decision? How did he discern the will of God? Well, if we put all of these things together as we look at his life and all the situations around this scenario and others, we see that he used his biblically informed mind. He considered all of the facts, all of the providence of God at work in his life. He especially considered the fact that the Thessalonians were up there struggling, unattended, baby Christians. Unattended, they did not have a shepherd. They are in hostile Satanic territory. He contemplated, I'm sure, the repeated yet undisclosed way Satan was hindering him, you will recall, from going there. And certainly he would consider what Christ would do; what would bring the greatest glory to God; what would reflect the righteousness and selflessness of Christ. And because his mind was saturated with the truth of Scripture and because he was yielded to the Spirit of God that dwelled within him, he was able to discern the will of

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God. He was able to make a wise decision and a wise decision will always be the best decision.

Now, to put it real practically: if you are weak in Scripture, if you have a weak understanding of the Bible, of theology, and worse yet, if you walk at a great distance from Christ and you basically are living for yourself, you give little attention to his will and to his word in what you think and do, you're going to end up making bad choices. It's a simple as that. Oh, they are going to seem right at the time. I mean, we can rationalize and justify just about anything, right, and then later on we realize, "My, what a mistake that was." And the reason for that is too often we are led by the flesh; we're ruled by our flesh, by our lusts, rather than the Spirit.

Though Paul's decision would cause him further distress in the long run or, I should say, in the short run, he was not motivated by love of self but love of God and love of others which would result in great joy in the long run, and often that's the way the Lord's will in our life works. You see, our will tends to seek immediate gratification that quickly disappears, but the Lord's will very often is very different. It very often requires us to be content, perhaps with a difficult situation, but that delayed gratification is going to come eventually and it's going to be eternal. The misguided and selfish standards of those seeking a church in my illustration a little bit earlier, illustrates this very thing. Because they do not find their great satisfaction and delight in Christ, they seek it elsewhere, but what the world offers will never satisfy. That's the problem. I mean, think about it: what good is it to go to a church that has all kinds of wonderful programs for your children if you are not being taught the word of God, taught how to apply the word of God so that you can shepherd the heart of your children? A child left unto himself will bring his mother to shame, Proverbs tells us.

So Paul thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone. In verse 2, we see that, "we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith." Now, here we see the first virtue that demonstrates a shepherd's love in action. He had, 1. A selfless commitment to their spiritual growth. Notice it says that he thought it was best to be "left behind." The term in the original language means "to be forsaken; it means to be abandoned." It was often used to describe the heartbreaking feeling of a person who has lost a loved one. Now, remember, travel in those days was very difficult and very dangerous. You basically had to go on foot. You had to carry everything you needed on your back. Traveling in a group was much safer, especially if you're ill. I mean, without help, you could possibly die. But isn't it interesting Paul considered the spiritual well-being of those baby Christians in Thessalonica more important than his own well-being.

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He practiced what he preached what he said to the Philippians in Philippians 2:3, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." Imagine what kind of church we would have if we all did that. You want to ask yourself: do I have a selfless commitment for the spiritual growth of others that I know? Others that I love? Or do I just live for myself in my own little comfort zone, always seeking my own comfort? You know, it's a very rare thing to find people who have that kind of sincere passion to see others strengthened and encouraged in the faith. Too often you'll find Christians wanting to serve Christ in order to exalt themselves. Too often they want to build their own little serfdom that they can rule and, of course, the bigger the better. Too often the motive is not to give of themselves in order for other people to grow in Christ but somehow to draw attention to themselves.

Well, fortunately, Paul had a young son in the faith whose name was Timothy, a man that he could send, and I find it interesting he describes Timothy in Philippians 2:20 saying, "For 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." Isn't that sad? He knows other believers here but this one, this guy is going to be genuinely concerned for your welfare. He's not going to be seeking after his own interests but that of Christ. He goes on to say, "But you know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father." I remember when I was meditating on this, I am so thankful that I have a number of Timothy's in this church that I am able to serve with. Every pastor needs a Timothy. Yea, every pastor needs a lot of Timothy's and Paul had this.

So because of his selfless concern for their spiritual protection and provision, Paul sends Timothy to help strengthen and encourage them as to their faith. Verse 3, "so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions." The term "afflictions" in the original language means "to squeeze; to pressure; to exert great energy in order to squeeze something," and that was the pressure that they were experiencing here, the pressure of persecution and suffering. Now, I want you to go back with me to these dear saints that we will one day meet. If you were a Gentile in that church, imagine how hard it would be to go to work every day, assuming you still had a job, and be mocked and ridiculed because you refused to worship the patron god or goddess of the trade guild that you were required to be a part of. Imagine how difficult it would be if you were a Gentile to endure the scoffing and the rejection of your friends and family. And imagine how easy it would be to yield to the temptation of former sexual partners that you had been involved with in the drunken orgies that were just part of your culture. Now, imagine what it would be like if you were a Jew, to come to Christ means you're going to be cast out of the synagogue. You have no

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more social interaction with your friends. In many cases, you'd be cast away from your family. Imagine what that would be like. Talk about people that need to be strengthened and encouraged in their faith. Folks, how desperately sheep need a shepherd. All of this home church stuff is a very dangerous thing for many reasons. They need a shepherd that God has called and gifted. They need a plurality of shepherds. We need each other.

And Paul reminds them that the trials that they are facing are not something that has just kind of caught God and all of us by surprise here, but rather he is reminding them that the trials that they're experiencing were ordained by a sovereign God to accomplish his glorious purposes in their lives. Notice he says, "for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this." In other words, folks, the great difficulties that you are experiencing, it's not because of divine punishment, it's not because God has forsaken you as some people might tell you, but rather you have been, these things have been ordained to exist in your life to conform you into the likeness of Christ; to give you an opportunity to experience the power of God; to watch him prove himself powerful on your behalf. Dear Christian, God did not come to make you and me happy, he came to make us holy. His primary purpose in saving us is for his glory, not our own, and we're reminded that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. We have to bear in mind that our joy comes in the morning. We have to be content with that.

He goes on in verse 4, "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. For this reason, when I could endure it no longer," I love that phrase. He couldn't endure it any longer. He says that two times. Folks, his heart was absolutely bursting to be with them to see how they were doing. This is what should captivate our hearts as well for each other. This should be at the heart of every pastor. "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." You see, he was deeply concerned that they might abandon the beliefs and the values they had accepted at their conversion. He was also worried that they would succumb to the temptations of the evil one, just the onslaught of satanic temptation that would cause them to renounce their faith and thus prove that it was not just superficial, it was phony, and that their labor would therefore be in vain, that it would have been just futile. He was so concerned about that.

If I can digress for a moment, as we look at the New Testament record, we see that Satan's temptations fall basically under two categories and these are categories that are very successful: worldliness and deception. When you think of, first of all, the lure of worldliness, we all know that there are a myriad of opportunities that he gives us to somehow satisfy the lusts of our flesh, and like drug addicts, we crave things that never bring lasting satisfaction. Oh, we think they will at the time but ultimately they don't, so

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we need more and more of whatever it is we're craving until the very things that once brought such joy bring us to ruin. Beloved, anything that you crave more than Christ will disappoint and it will probably bring destruction into your life. He was concerned about that for these dear saints, the lure of worldliness. Secondly, Satan uses deceptions, typically religious and spiritual deceptions. In 2 Corinthians 10 we read how that Satan erects fortresses, Paul calls it, religious and philosophical deceptions. He talks about strongholds of lies that are appealing to the flesh. He speaks there of speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God. All you have to do now is go to a college or a university and you're going to hear these speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God. Political ideologies, philosophical ideologies, psychological ideologies, political correctness, whatever, false religions like Roman Catholicism, like liberal Christianity, the cults, Islam, and on and on it goes. Proud intellectualism that, for example, scoffs at the inspiration and the infallibility and the authority of the word of God. Paul calls these things doctrines of demons in 1 Timothy 4, that are taught by hypocritical liars, he says, that are seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron. They will save the most outrageous, unbiblical, even blasphemous things and it doesn't bother them. Peter tells us that they are false prophets who will rise up within the church, rise up among the people and secretly introduce destructive heresies. They will seduce people with their sensuality, he says, and in their greed, they will exploit the naïve. He says they are untaught and they are unstable. They distort the Scriptures. And, folks, this is just absolutely ubiquitous today in our culture. All you have to do is turn on the television, turn on the radio, look on the internet, go to the Christian bookstore these days, many times on the best-selling shelf, you will find things that are patently unbiblical. Where is the discernment?

This is what Paul was worried about. We now live in a religious era where false teachers have re-created Christ into a God of their own making. They have redefined the Gospel in order to mitigate the seriousness and the consequences of sin. They have redefined the church to accommodate their love for self and their love for the world as I illustrated earlier. And Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:4 that, "Satan is the God of this world who has blinded the minds of the unbelievers that they might not see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ." And even with believers, he uses these same types of things, these ingenious schemes to distract us from worshiping Christ; to discourage us and destroy our testimony; to forsake our first love for Christ as he did with the Ephesians; to cause us to forget his goodness and his sovereignty over all things and to forget his unchanging promises. And then suddenly we begin to walk by the flesh rather than by the Spirit but we think we are so religious because we're part of a church or we're doing religious things, but ultimately these things lead us to misery and to ruin and our character becomes defined by our anger, by our discontent. We become controlling, unforgiving, jealous, divisive, ungrateful and on and on it goes. Because of these dangers, Paul warned

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the saints in Corinth in 2 Corinthians 11:3, "I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." That's the danger. That's what kept him up at night, so to speak: Satan's temptations, the tempter, worldliness and deception.

We see a combination of these things in so many places. Let me give you one that has come up here of late that I'm having to deal with, it's the teaching of one of the most prominent charlatans of our day, his name is Joel Osteen. He's got a new book called, "The Power of I Am: Choosing today to rise to a new level by focusing on these two words, I Am." By the way, that's a popular theme in New Age pagan mysticism. You can look on the internet or at Amazon and you'll see over a dozen books that have "I Am" on it, saying basically the same thing. According to the book's description, it says. "Joel Osteen reveals how the power of 'I Am' can help you discover your unique abilities and advantages to lead a more productive and happier life. His insights and encouragement are illustrated with many amazing stories of people who turned their lives around by focusing on the positive power of this principle. You can choose to rise to a new level and invite God's goodness by focusing on these two words, 'I Am.'" Referring to the reader, not to God, the great I AM. You see, folks, Satan is a master counterfeiter and sadly most Christians would look at this and, or I shouldn't say most, many will look at this and certainly unsaved people and think, "Wow, isn't this great? What a great religious principle here. I need to grab a hold of this." But what they don't realize is that I AM is the covenant name of God first revealed to Moses in Exodus 3. He says, "I AM WHO I AM." In other words, "I AM. You tell the people, my covenant people of Israel, that I am the preexistent, self-existent one; the uncreated Creator that is and will always be." In fact, when he told Moses who he was and declared his name, the ground was so holy that he required Moses to take off his sandals. Osteen's book is just egregious example of satanic blasphemy. Even the capitalization of "I AM" on the book cover is an insult to a holy God.

Folks, this was the title of Jesus used to describe himself in John 8:58. Remember, he told the unbelieving Jews, "before Abraham was born, I am. I want you to know that I am God." He referred to himself in the present continuous tense because he has always and will always exist. And you remember when they came to arrest Jesus, Jesus said, "Who are you looking for?" "We're looking for Jesus, the Nazarene." And what did he say? "I AM." And what happened? It's like something hit them all right between the eyes, they all fell back. It's an amazing thing. They all drew back and fell to the ground. But here we see an example of how Satan will deceive a person to tell self-centered, narcissistic, sinful men and women to take God's holy name and apply it to themselves; to think positively and declare good things about themselves so that they can manipulate God to open up his stingy hands and give them what they want. Osteen falsely promises the

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naïve and the ignorant, "When you talk like this, these things will follow you and God will provide them." Yeah, just like God has provided Osteen with a new \$10.5 million mansion and his lavish lifestyle. Osteen says, "It's God's will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty."

Folks, these are just Satanic deceptions. This is why Paul was so concerned for his people. By the way, obviously Jesus and the apostles and countless saints down through the centuries didn't understand that they were supposed to live in prosperity rather than poverty. This was a heavy burden for him. It's a heavy burden for me for each of you because I know, I mean, this stuff is just everywhere and that's why it's so important for me to stand in this pulpit and say, "Thus saith the Lord, be careful of this person. Here's the name. Here's what they're writing." You don't hear the FDA coming out and saying, "Hey folks, we found some drugs that will kill you. Now, we can't tell you what the name is because we don't want to offend anybody but you need to be careful." No, I have to tell you.

Well, he had a selfless commitment to their spiritual growth and, secondly, he had a longing to fellowship with them. Notice beginning in verse 6, "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, 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." You see, Paul was ecstatic when he got the news from Timothy that they were standing firm in their faith, they continued to love Christ. And by the way, it was their firmness in the faith and their love for Christ that made them such effective evangelists. You remember in chapter 1, verse 8, that their reputation had spread all through Macedonia and Achaia.

You want to ask yourself: does this describe me? Is my life marked by a love for Christ? By a faith in Christ, therefore a love for others, a love for the lost? So often I hear people lamenting and complaining over their lot in life and sometimes it's very sad indeed but very often those that are lamenting the loudest and complaining the most are those who are missing these two important virtues in their soul: they lack a faith in Christ and a love for Christ. And folks, without this, your misery will remain undiminished because we have to understand that when we come to Christ, we lay the burden of our sin and our guilt upon him and then as a result of that, we love him. Love is a consequence of our faith, and as a result of that, we are obedient to him and we are content with what he brings into our life. Paul says that godliness is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. You see, those who realize they have been forgiven much, will love much; and they will trust much; they will rejoice much; they will serve much; and they will complain little.

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You might want to ask yourself: am I acutely aware of really the depths of my sin? Do I find in Christ a Savior who is magnificent enough and even munificent enough to save me from all my sins? You see, folks, when you grasp those great truths, that is what animates your love for Christ. Too often today we are told to forget about our sin. "You know, ignore those feelings of guilt. After all, grace covers all of that." I remember when I was a young man, there was a period in my life where a counselor had told me this, "You know, stop examining yourself. All that's going to do is frustrate grace. God has covered all of that. You know, put away all of that type of thinking. In fact, if you keep thinking about that, all you're going to do is become legalistic." The attitude is basically, "Hey, we're all messed up. We're all going to go to the grave messed up. We're all just a bunch of sinners so let's just celebrate the Gospel." Well, hey, do you know what? I'm all for that and there is something biblical to all of that, but you will recall, for example, in light of the great promises of God's saving grace, Paul also tells us in 2 Corinthians 7:1, "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us also cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

You see, here's the danger of having a cavalier attitude toward our sin: the moment you merely accept your sin and ignore the guilt and shame of it, your love for Christ will begin to diminish and your love for self will begin to increase. Oh, child of God, never mitigate the seriousness and the consequences of your sin. Be willing to plumb the depths of it because the more you are amazed by your sin, the more you will be amazed at God's grace. The more you see the depth and breadth of your sin, the more you will love the one who paid the penalty for it, and with sincerity of heart you will be able to sing, "Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe, sin had left a crimson stain, but," what? "He washed it white as snow." Paul's selfless love for Christ was motivated by this very thing. He recognized the depths of his depravity, of his sinfulness. He lamented over it in Romans 7. He said, "I am the greatest of sinners." You see, those we know whose hearts are most bursting with love for Christ are always those who are the most acutely aware of the wrath that they deserve. They are acutely aware of what they have received versus what they have. We have received forgiveness and imputed righteousness and, folks, sincere love for Christ will always produce joyful obedience. Joyful obedience. Not in order to earn our salvation but in order to enjoy it.

This is why Paul is rejoicing in the Thessalonians and this is why he longed to be with them. Don't you love to be around believers who grasp these things? It's not like we're all sitting around saying, "Oh boy, I'm so terrible. I'm just so sinful. I want to tell you all that I did." No, no, no, no, but we are acutely aware of that and therefore we're celebrating God's grace. It's a joy to be around those kinds of folks and what a burden it is to be around whiny Christians that will just suck the life out of you because all they can focus

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on is how bad their life is rather than all that they have in Christ. But because of their love for Christ, even in the midst of all of their problems, Paul longed to be with these Thessalonian believers just as also they longed to be with him. By the way, this is the way it ought to be in the church. We ought to long to be with each other. But I want you to bear in mind something that I believe emerges from this text: the reason they had such affection for one another is because the steel of their relationship had been forged and really hardened in the fires of great adversity. You might say they were a band of brothers. They were comrades in arms. They were battle tested, battle scarred, combat wounded soldiers, if you will. They were soldiers of the cross. They were still engaged in the fight. They were standing shoulder-to-shoulder striving together for the Gospel in service to Christ. They had to have each other's back. They knew how much they needed each other.

Beloved, please understand, it's only when we find ourselves in the trenches of warfare for the sake of the kingdom that we will find ourselves being bound together in genuine Christian fellowship. New Testament fellowship, by the way, the term always has the idea of participation in something. It's not merely getting together and having fun with pizza and potlucks. That's fellowship too but it's so much more than that. You see, when the bullets are flying and people are dying, there's no time for petty jealousies and strife. There is no time for turf wars and for preference bashing. We need each other. We have to be devoted to one another. If I could put it a little bit differently: we must understand that those who never leave their comfort zone of Christianity, live in their little safe bubble, enjoying their churchianity, those who refuse to join in the battle will never experience the rich blessing of genuine Christian fellowship. You'll never know how much you need me and your other brothers and sisters, you'll never know how much we need each other, and so therefore you'll never know what it is to long to be with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul was sick. He was alone, living in poverty, yet verse 7, "for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted." Are you kidding me? You were comforted in light of what's going on? You're comforted, why? "Through your faith." Then he goes on and he says, "For now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord." I mean, poor Paul, alone, sickly in Athens here, a man who had suffered in ways that we can't imagine, but because of their faith he is comforted and now he really lives. Folks, what joy there is in serving Christ; to watch him do his marvelous work of grace in a person's soul, and then to see them stand firm in the Lord, as Paul says. By the way, that was a military term describing a soldier who refuses to give ground to the enemy. You will recall Paul speaks about spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6 and there the Holy Spirit instructs us in this whole matter of how we engage the enemy, and twice he says, "Stand firm." Now think about that: he doesn't say, "Go on the offensive." He doesn't say, "Go

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forth and conquer Satan." He doesn't say, "You need to be a hard core devil stomping ninja." He says, "I want you to hold your ground." That's the point. "Don't be moved away from what you know to be true. When the smoke clears and the battle is over, I want you to be standing firm in your faith. Don't lose ground." He says this again to them in 2 Thessalonians 2, beginning in verse 13, "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren," here's what I want you to do, in light of all of this, "I want you to stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us."

I'm so burdened for each of you, especially those of you that are struggling in various ways in your life. Some of you are struggling because of self-inflicted wounds. Some of you are struggling because you're living in a fallen world and things just typically don't go well very long. There are great difficulties, but regardless of the cause, may I remind you of something that emerges from this text, something that we see all through Scripture and that is this: serving and praying saints who never lose sight of their sin and the Savior, are never defeated by their trials. Never. Instead, they really live. That's what we see here. They stand firm in their faith. And like Paul and those early believers in ancient Thessalonica, their life was not defined by sadness but by gladness. Beloved, always look beyond the immediate trial and even be willing to acknowledge, "Lord, I deserve worse than what I've been given here and so I celebrate your grace and I long for that day when I will be in your presence and all of this will be over. But as for today, I will serve you. I will decisively commit myself to be engaged in the battle." Beloved, don't think that the only way you can experience the soul-satisfying joy of the presence of your God is when the trial is over. Instead, look for him in the heat of the battle. Look for him in the crucible of grace. And do you know what you will find? He is waiting for you there.

And this is what animated Paul's heart and therefore we see, 3. He had a deep gratitude for God's grace in their lives. Notice verse 9, "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." You see, gratitude for God's saving and transforming grace in our lives or in the lives of those we love will always be the mark of a mature believer. We will rejoice, we will find our souls just erupting with doxologies of praise when we see our sons and daughters and wives and husbands and grandchildren come to a saving knowledge of Christ; when we see our friends and neighbors that we have prayed for be radically transformed by the Gospel. What an exhilarating thing. I mean, it makes all of life worth it and that's what he's saying here. He knows that no one can be saved, no one can be sanctified apart from God's ongoing work in our lives. We're all debtors of his grace and so for this reason he

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says, "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." In other words, there is absolutely nothing we can do to repay such a debt so what are we left with? Praise. Rejoicing. Celebration. This is the heart of Paul.

A shepherd's love can be seen in action through his selfless commitment to the spiritual growth of his flock, his longing to fellowship with them, his deep gratitude for God's grace in their lives, and finally through a disciplined devotion to pray for opportunities to minister to them. Notice verse 10, he says, "we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?" Paul was never satisfied, was he? He was never satisfied with where he was spiritually, with where others were, those to whom he ministered. And folks, you want to be careful: don't ever think that you have arrived. Don't ever think that, "Boy, it's good now I've kind of plateaued here. This is great." He always wanted to tell them more, didn't he? Why? Because he wanted them to do more. Why? Because he wanted them to enjoy more. He wanted them to experience God's power, his presence. 1 Thessalonians 4:1, "we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may," what? "Excel still more." And here we see that this passion moved him to pray earnestly night and day for an opportunity to instruct them face-to-face. He wanted to be with them so that he could help them complete what was lacking in their faith, and as a pastor, I understand this. Oh, do I understand this. I share this burden for each of you, as do all of the elders here at Calvary Bible Church, and so many of you share this burden. This is to be our burden as well, not just the burden of a pastor. And why is this so important? Because these things bring us to a level of spiritual maturity and with spiritual maturity comes blessing, comes power, comes joy regardless of the situation we find ourselves in.

So may I challenge you this morning, dear friends, to pray for this kind of love and to excel still more in your heart that you might have a selfless commitment to the spiritual growth of those in your family, those in your church family; that you might develop a longing to fellowship with them because you're engaged with them in the battle; that you also might have a deep gratitude for God's grace in all of our lives and a disciplined devotion to pray for opportunities to minister to your brothers and sisters in Christ, and, oh, when this happens, we will be able to sing with the Psalmist that we read earlier a new song, for he has done wonderful things. Isn't that the truth? Oh, he's done wonderful things in our lives.

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Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for these encouraging words. As we read them, we realize that we all fall short in various ways but we thank you that it is indeed the passion of our heart to be on that trajectory and we know that that very desire is something that you have placed within us. So I pray that by the power of your Spirit, we might live out these great truths that you might be exalted, that in all things Christ might have the preeminence for it is in his name that I pray. Amen.

We pray you have been edified by this presentation. You have been listening to Pastor, Bible Teacher, and Author, Dr. David Harrell. For more information or for other messages from Dr. Harrell, please visit the Olive Tree Christian Resources website at otcr.org.

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