

# 1 Thessalonians 3 • Established in the Faith

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We're in 1 Thessalonians. Open your Bibles there, please. 1 Thessalonians. Are you standing fast in the Lord? I hope you are. That's what this chapter is really all about. By the way, who can tell they top the onions without even looking at a field? I feel it every year. I don't know about some of you, but man, my allergies just go nuts. I can always tell. I wake up in the morning and go, they top the onions, and then I drive out and there they are laying over on their side. So anyway, just wanted you to know you're not alone.

Chapter 3. Let's read it. *"<sup>1</sup>Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, <sup>2</sup> and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, <sup>3</sup> that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. <sup>4</sup> 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.*

*<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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—<sup>7</sup> for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.*

*<sup>8</sup> For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. <sup>9</sup> For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, <sup>10</sup> as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?*

*<sup>11</sup> Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, <sup>12</sup> and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, <sup>13</sup> 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." (ESV)*

Let's pray. Father, God, open our hearts. You are the minister of the Word through Your Spirit. Do that ministry today. Open our ears. Open our spiritual eyes. We ask it in Jesus' name, amen. Amen.

You might remember in the last chapter, Paul was telling the believers there in Thessalonica how dear they were to him, and that was the reason Timothy then was sent back to their area. Paul was in Athens, he decided to stay there but he was just so anxious to find out how these guys had been doing because remember he'd only been there three weeks, and then they'd gotten thrown out of town, and he didn't know how these people were going to respond to all that.

And they themselves were dealing with some persecution because of their newfound faith in Jesus. And so, Paul was just...I mean, can you imagine living in a world where there's no quick internet? You can't call their cell phone. There's just...there's no way to find out quickly. So, he's got to send a messenger back and trips, journeys, back in those days took time, and so he has to send Timothy back. Timothy is going to stay with them for a while, and then he's going to wait till Timothy gets back to give him an update on how the people are doing there.

And he wanted to know, of course, whether or not the ministry of the Word had taken root in their lives, and whether they were actually growing as far as those who seem to respond to the gospel. So, he begins by saying (paraphrasing verses 1 and 2) when we could just bear it no longer, he says, we got to the point where we just couldn't stand it. So, we decided that we would send Timothy back and find out how you're doing.

But you'll notice there in verse 2 that Paul sent Timothy to do two things; he says, I send him there to establish and exhort. Those are the two keywords, and they're good words for you to note in your Bible, maybe even underline. If you have a different translation, you might have a couple of different words there, but they mean essentially the same thing.

The word establish means to set something. Like, you know, if you're building a fence and you want your fence posts not to move, you usually set them in concrete. Right. And so, it's kind of that same idea when Paul says, I've sent Timothy to establish your faith. He wanted him to do that to make...to bring them to a place where they won't be shaken.

I remember when we...when Sue and I lived, we actually used to live just a block away from the property here for the first several years that we were here, and we had this old, rotten fence. It looked okay from the out, but if you looked

close, it was falling down, and sometimes we'd get these windstorms, and I couldn't afford to fix it, and we'd get these windstorms in the middle of the night, and I'd see the fence go down, which was not a small thing because the guy over on the backside of our fence had cows and horses, and they would come into our yard. I would literally see cows grazing in our backyard, which is a strange sight when you kind of presumed to be living in town but, it wouldn't hold up to the wind because it just hadn't been built correctly.

And Paul is concerned about the believers in Thessalonica, that their faith in Jesus is such that it can stand. It can stand the storms of life. The difficulties and it's not going to tip over and be shaken. That's why I started off today saying, are you standing fast in your faith? Are you steadfast in your faith?

I had a couple of notes just this last week that highlighted this whole idea of what it means to be established in your faith. One was a friend of Sue's and mine that lost her mother this last week, just unexpectedly, and her mother wasn't that terribly old, and she just upped and died. She texted us to tell us, she lives down in New Orleans, and she texted us to let us know her mother had passed, and we both said, oh, so sorry. We're praying for you.

And a couple of days went by, and I decided to text her to see how she was doing and she... I just, that's what I said, hi, how are you doing? And she wrote me back and she said, you know, I'm doing great. Not that losing a parent is ever easy, but she'd went on to kind of explain in a very brief way in her text, she said, I know that God has been preparing me for this day because of the time that I've spent in the scriptures in the last few years, and she said, I'm doing surprisingly well. And I thought, you know what, that's someone who is established in their faith, right?

And then I received an email from a man here on Friday, and I was so blessed by this note, I read it in our staff meeting and I thought I would share it with you. You don't know him. I don't know him. He listened, found us online. But I want you to read... I want you to hear what he says here, okay? Think about this whole idea of being established in your faith.

He said (reading from the note), Pastor Paul, two years ago I started seriously studying the Bible. I started in Matthew and went book by book. When I got to Romans, my wife recommended a video series she saw in her Bible study. Well, I had trouble with the link, but it took me to YouTube and there were you, at the top, with Romans chapter 1. So, I gave it a try. Over the next 18 months or so, I've studied Romans through Revelation with you and then went back to Matthew, Mark, and now Luke.

He goes on to write, says, I'm so grateful for all that I've learned and how my life has changed. And he goes on to talk about how many...he actually listens to each message four times. Each one. Okay, I won't get into all that but then he asks this, he says, how has my life changed?

He said, well, back in 2011, (before he had established himself in the faith, he said) my company was bought out and I was laid off and even though I was given a six-figure severance package, I was panicked. I was looking for natural solutions. This past March, I was laid off because of COVID-19, and I got a one-month severance. But this time, I was very calm, and my focus is now on supernatural solutions. I don't worry about what I can't do, but I focus on what God can do.

Isn't that sweet? I was so blessed when I read that because...Guys, that's what it means to be established in your faith. When you are established in your faith... Think of it like that fence post that's in that concrete, right? No matter what comes your way, you're not going to be moved because you are established. Established...Established...Established.

There are so many things that we are established in. We're established in our salvation. We're established in our understanding of who God is. All those things we need to become established in.

I had another note from a guy who wrote me and said, I used to believe that Jesus told parables during His earthly ministry because they were easy to understand. Then I get to Matthew chapter 13, and I find that He told parables so they wouldn't understand. He's like, what's the deal? This has rocked my world. He says it's like He doesn't want him to be saved.

And I wrote him back and I said, well, I can help you to figure out why Jesus taught in parables, but you need to figure out whether you believe God is who He said He is first because if you don't, your world is going to continue to be rocked every time something happens that you can't figure out. And how often does that happen? Every day, practically, where something happens that your kind of left kind of going, what in the world, right? Yeah, it happens. So, if you're established in who God is like: He's good, He's merciful, He's kind, He's gracious, and all those other things.

You're going to be able to fall back on that established understanding and say, okay, there's obviously things here that I don't get; and that's consistent with God's Word, right? So, I'm going to rest in Him. I'm going to rest in Him. Because I'm established in who He is or I'm established in who I am in Him.

You need that establishing when the enemy comes along to cause you to doubt. You need to be established in your faith, right?

It's so important, so important and that's why Paul so desperately wanted to send Timothy back to find out have they been established, or have they been uprooted. I get notes and calls from people that are just all in a lather about what's going on in their lives and I just...I just...I don't usually say it, but I want to say, if you would just get established in your faith, this wouldn't happen.

So, I'm here to pray with you. I'm here to love on you but you got to do the hard work. Did you hear how the first gal I told you about who lives in New Orleans, she went through our entire online Genesis to Revelation Bible studies, the whole thing, took her I don't know a few years? She used to send me pictures of her notes, pages and pages of notes. And this other guy you heard, his name was Vernon, he said for 18 months he just was devoting himself to studying the Word of God, listening to the Word of God, hearing it taught, and so forth.

So, you see, you got to do...establishing doesn't happen overnight. You got to do the hard work, and it takes diligence and so forth. But you'll notice that Paul also sent Timothy to exhort them in their faith and this word can be translated, comfort or encourage; and if you have a different Bible translation that you're reading from, you may actually see one of those two words.

I believe the old King James says, comfort, and that is a meaning of it. But Paul wanted Timothy to encourage the believers and exhort them to stand strong. Why? Look at verse 3 in your Bible. Read it with me. *“<sup>3</sup> that no one be moved by these afflictions...”* That's it right there. That no one be moved...that no one be moved...by these afflictions. That's the whole purpose.

And of course, by these afflictions, Paul's talking about the fact that, you know, they knew that he had been...he'd been abused in Philippi, imprisoned, beaten before they even got to Thessalonica; and then when they got to Thessalonica, they were only there three weeks before they were run out of town. Those are afflictions.

And so, Paul says, I want you to be...I want you to be encouraged, comforted, so that you're not moved. And then look at the end of this verse. The end of verse 3 says, *“<sup>3</sup>...For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.”* And by we, he means all Christians. So, there's your daily good news verse, you guys.

We are destined for afflictions. Isn't that fun? You still want to be a Christian? Yeah. Well, this is it. This is life, isn't it? This is what we're destined for. This is what we are called to, to live in a world that doesn't get it, and never will, unless they come to Jesus. It's not going to happen.

Do you remember what Jesus... Jesus talked a lot about this. John records one passage in John chapter 15. Let me put it on the screen for you. He says,

**John 15:18-19 (ESV)**

*“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”*

That's just a simple fact of the matter. Don't cry over spilled milk. It's just the way it is. The world is never going to like you if you're living for Jesus. Now, if you're living a compromised life and you're just kind of doing the things the world does, they'll probably buddy up to you okay.

But if you're living for Christ, Paul wrote to Timothy (referring to **2 Timothy 3:12 ESV**) and said, everyone who wants to live a godly life, in Christ Jesus, will be persecuted. So, with the determination to just live for Christ comes persecution. It's what we've been destined for. So, notice he says in verse 4, he says, *“<sup>4</sup> 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.”*

So, isn't that interesting? Paul didn't preach a pain-free gospel. He didn't preach a prosperity gospel, that God never wants you to suffer sort of a thing. Paul says right here, he says, we told you over and over again that this is what was going to happen, and it turned out just that way.

And then verse 5 is interesting, *“<sup>5</sup> 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.”* Now, this is a very important verse that you and I pay attention to and understand, as far as what it's saying, because the apostle is confirming in this verse something that Jesus told us as well; and that is, it is possible to share the gospel and do the work of sowing the seed and have no benefit from it at all.

I wish that wasn't true. I really do. But what that means is, it's possible for the seed to be scattered and do nothing or very little. It's possible. You see, that's what Paul's saying here. He says I was afraid. The reason I sent Timothy is I

was afraid. I was afraid that our labor among you had been in vain, and the word vain means empty.

I was afraid that our labor among you had been empty and would ultimately not bear fruit. You might say, well, now where did Jesus talk about this? The Parable of the Sower (referring to **Matthew 13 ESV**). When you read in the gospels, The Parable of the Sower, you'll recall that Jesus illustrated different kinds of ground, if you will, where seed got scattered, and we learn that the seed is a picture of the Word of God being sown among mankind.

But, there are three possible grounds where the seed basically is of no benefit to those who heard it, or at least very little benefit. Three grounds, you'll remember that, and one of the ways the seed was sown, you'll remember, was on rocky ground. You remember that? It was sown on the path. It was sown among the weeds. It was sown on rocky ground, and it was sown on good soil, that was the fourth one. But for three of them, it was a bad situation and particularly the rocky soil. Let me put this on the screen for you from Matthew chapter 13.

**Matthew 13:20-21 (ESV)**

*“As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.”*

That is exactly what Paul was afraid had happened in Thessalonica. Exactly. It was that scenario right there. Okay. And that's one of the reasons Paul spent so much time with new believers, telling them that we're destined to suffer persecution. So, that when it happens, they're not going to go, what's this? Nobody told me about this. What's this suffering? I didn't sign up for suffering.

Paul was like, no, no, no we're going to prepare these guys. This is going to be hard, right? Jesus said in this world you will have trouble. Well, if you don't ever understand that, and lay hold of it, you're going to get blindsided. And pretty soon you're laying on your back, looking up at the sky, wondering how you got in that position. Good grief, who hit me?

So, Paul feared that might be the case and this is a great reminder for you and I to just...to understand that after the seed is sown, if you share Jesus with somebody, man, that's where the work starts. Don't go thinking, well, I shared Jesus with him. Praise the Lord. No, that's when you start praying. That's when you begin to pray. You begin to pray for that seed to germinate and find itself in

good soil, and you pray against the weeds, and you pray against the shallowness of the soil, and the rocks, and so forth.

I hear people say all the time, well, at least we sowed some seed. I don't know if they responded, but at least we sowed some seed among them. Maybe. Maybe you sowed some seed. Maybe not. Jesus said that one of the grounds that the rocks get put on was the path, remember, it's the hard path and that didn't get sown at all. It just got scattered. And there's a difference between seed being sown and seed being scattered.

Pretty much anybody can scatter seed, and that's really our job is just to scatter the seed. But where is it going to actually germinate? Well, it's going to germinate in the heart that's prepared for it to do so. But that's where we pray. That's where we have to really invest ourselves in prayer because planting seed is one thing, but seeing it grow and bear fruit is another matter altogether.

Now, however, we learn here, as we read on, that in Thessalonica the seed was not only growing, it was bearing fruit. And in verse 6 and following, Paul then reports how Timothy has just come back. He's reported this incredible news and we're just so pumped.

He even says in verse 7, in fact, because of this news, even in all our distress and affliction, we've been comforted by this news to the point where we understand that you're standing fast in the Lord, and we are happy about that. We are just overjoyed, and this is the kind of thing that used to keep Paul going, I think. I really do. I think that this kind of news brought encouragement to him. Just hearing that people's faith was strong, their love for another was deep.

It's kind of like Paul's like, yes, let's go on to the next city. It's worth it. The persecution, the difficulties, they're all worth it. And as a pastor, I can relate. I haven't had to deal with anything close to his persecutions, but I sure love hearing how God's Word impacts people's hearts and lives, and I got to tell you, it goes a long way for helping me. I need encouragement.

You might say, well, what's the best way you can encourage your pastor? You want me to tell you? Share the good stuff, not just the bad. We tend to hear a lot of bad. People usually only come and talk when they're in a tailspin. We love to hear it when people are doing good. That just... that's our food. When the Lord has really touched your heart with something. When you feel like the Lord just took you from one plateau to another level of growth. I want to hear about that.



Paul loved hearing about that. He says, man, he says, you know, we're...now we really live. That's what he goes on to say in verse 9 (paraphrasing), *"<sup>9</sup> For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you..."* He's like, oh, we are just overjoyed. (paraphrasing verse 10) We pray earnestly night and day.

By the way, it doesn't mean they pray all night and all day. When he says, we pray night and day, it means we stop during the night and we pray, and when we...and during the day, we stop, and we pray for you. During night and day, we pray for you. And he says, we pray earnestly *"<sup>10</sup>...that we may see you face to face."*

I want you to notice the end of verse 10, *"<sup>10</sup>...and supply what is lacking in your faith?"* I wonder what Paul means by that. Supply what is, he says, I'm anxious to come be with you again so that I can supply what is lacking in your faith. That's not an insult. Paul is just referring to the difference between the faith of a new believer and the faith of somebody who's been walking with the Lord for a while and who has matured, right?

The person who is brand new, of course, there's going to be a lack. Of course, there is. We all understand that. We get that. And Paul wanted to see their faith strengthened and he wanted to do that through teaching and exhortation and so he says, we're praying that we can come back and be with you again. By the way, the next two chapters of 1 Thessalonians are going to go a long way toward Paul beginning to fill in the gaps in their faith.

There's some great stuff in the last two chapters of this letter. So, stay tuned for that. But he basically ends this chapter with a prayer for the believers. In verse 11, he says, *"<sup>11</sup> Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you,"* The first thing Paul is asking for in prayer is that God would direct him back to Thessalonica, so that he can spend time with the new babes in Christ and he wants to encourage and help them and then he prays for them.

Verse 12, he says, *"<sup>12</sup> and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all..."* Notice that, it's not just for loving one another in the body of Christ, but for everyone. He says, *"...as we do for you,"* so that they might increase and abound, words that are pretty similar there, but that they might abound in what? Joy? That's nice. Giving? Service? Those are good things. No, he says, we're praying that you would increase and abound in love.

Isn't that interesting? That's the big thing that Paul prays for, that they would increase and abound in love for one another and for others. By the way, the

word love here is not brotherly love, it's agape love. And our ability to abound and increase in agape love only comes through the Holy Spirit, okay? It doesn't come by you dredging up the will. Have you ever done that with somebody who's just kind of unlovable? You are kind of like, I am going to love them if it's the last thing I do, right?

I'm going to love you, I love you, and you can tell that it's just...I'm working it up, I'm going to love you. No, that's not what we're dealing with here. We're talking about agape love, which is a gift from God. That's why he says, I pray that you would increase and abound in the gift of agape.

Christians, if there's somebody in your life who you have a hard time loving, and I'm willing to bet that's a fairly universal thing, okay, I mean I don't have to be prophetic to know that we all struggle with somebody or some group of people that we just don't love, and we don't, and there's no use pretending we don't. Well, stop trying to dredge it up. Stop feeling guilty about it, necessarily. Come to the Lord and just say, Lord, would you give me the gift of agape for that person? Because that's not natural, it's supernatural. We're not asking, you see, natural things can't be dredged up through natural means. It has to come through the agency of the Holy Spirit living within you and if you think, well, I just don't think I can do that. Well, I know you can't do that. It's only through the Spirit that you can do that.

What God is looking for out of you, though, is the willingness, you see, to yield to Him. Isn't it interesting that God has enabled us to put a blockade on His Spirit working in our lives if we want to? Isn't that amazing? He actually allows us to be stinkers about people. And if I don't kind of like somebody, He'll let me just kind of wallow in that. He'll let me do it. Now, I will be grieving the Holy Spirit, make no mistake about it. Paul says to the Ephesians (referring to **Ephesians 4:30 ESV**), do not grieve the Holy Spirit with whom you've been sealed for the day of redemption, right?

Don't...anything you and I do, when we insist on having our own fleshly way, is grieving to the Holy Spirit. What God wants you and I to do is to yield to His Spirit within us so that His Spirit, His nature, His heart, the fruits that are recorded for us in the Word of God, the fruits of the Spirit, would have easy access to be able to come out and be displayed for others to see and so forth. But it takes a willingness. It takes me willing to say, I'm willing to set aside my dislike and maybe all the excellent excuses I have for that dislike. To set those all aside and say, Jesus, in your presence, I give up my rights.

Isn't that interesting? We sing that in songs sometimes. I'm giving up my rights. Don't we sing that? Oh, we sing it. It's easy to sing. I could sing it all day long. Now just ask me to do it, to give up my right to be angry, to give up my right to dislike somebody for what they've done to me. Just comes down to whether or not I'm going to... what do I want to do, who do I want to please the most? Who do I want to please the most? Do I want to please me, or do I want to please Him?

Pastor, why am I struggling so much in this area? Because you want to please you. Let's not sugarcoat it. It's not rocket science, you guys. I sin because I like to please myself. Duh! I want to get to the point, though, where my heart and my desire is to please my Savior for all that He has done for me. I owe Him that. He deserves me to lay down my rights. He laid down so much to come and die for me, and yet I continue to insist on my way.

He ends the chapter by saying...telling us what comes from loving. Verse 13, *“<sup>13</sup> so that he (God) may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”* In other words, he's saying here that when you yield to His Spirit, and you are willing to exercise that gift of agape, toward others, and to set aside your rights. You enter into a place where your hearts become blameless in holiness. That's not perfection you guys. Get the idea of perfection out of your gourd. You and I will not be perfect, this side of the veil. I don't care how hard you try, end of conversation. But you can be blameless, because blameless and perfect are two different things.

Blameless is not subject to blame, and most of the time we're not subject to blame simply because we ask God to forgive us. It's gone. But he's talking about blameless, may your heart be blameless in holiness. Now, holiness, kind of a difficult concept to grasp because there's different flavors of holiness.

There's positional holiness. Do you know that right now in Jesus you are holy? You are set apart. That's what holy means. Set apart, different. You are holy simply by virtue of the fact that you came to Jesus, and you accepted Him as your Savior. That's positional holiness.

But there's practical holiness, where you're walking out that holiness. That's what Paul's praying for the Thessalonians, that they would walk out holiness toward others, by loving. And so if you...if the whole concept of holiness is kind of confusing for you just think of it this way, it's the power to be different. Practical holiness. Okay, there's a quote. Practical holiness is the power to be different from the world.

Practical holiness, the power from God to be different, and let me tell you something if you love people who are hard to love or who've hurt you, you're going to be different. You're going to be big-time different. And that's what Paul's talking about, because we know that kind of thing, just loving people, is so contrary to what we see in the world today.

Have you ever seen hatred like we're seeing it today? No, it's crazy. But you know what? Paul told us it would be that way. No surprise. Paul told us it would be just that way. Look at 2 Timothy on the screen. Chapter 3 verses 1 through 4.

**2 Timothy 3:1-4 (ESV)**

*“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,”*

I'm not sitting here trying to bum out your day. I'm just simply creating a backdrop for you so that you can understand what God wants you to be. He wants you to be different from that. So, take that ugly picture and you come to the Lord and say, I want to be different, but I recognize, Lord, that I need your Holy Spirit to empower me to be different, right?

Because the natural thing to do for someone who has hurt me is to dislike them. That's natural. That's easy. I don't have to try to do that. So, if I'm going to live a supernatural life, I'm going to have to live in such a way that Your Spirit flows through me, and I start loving people in ways that I am otherwise not able to do.

So, oh, interesting. We can be blameless in holiness. Wow, how do we get to be blameless in holiness by just loving? Because loving is the fulfillment of the law. To love God and to love others, fulfills the law.