

Be Established in Your Faith: 1Thess. 2:17 – 2Thess 3:16

Despite all the obvious disadvantages of technology, it has helped many people to manage and overcome the separation and isolation caused by “lockdown”. Zoom, email, social media, etc, has enabled us to stay in contact almost minute by minute. But imagine if we were only able to send one or two letters to each other during that time. If that were the only communication between us, what would we say? What questions would we ask? What would our greatest concern be?

Paul undertook many travels during his apostolic ministry, but when and where he went was sometimes not in his control. The path of his missionary journeys took unexpected turns as circumstances, or divine guidance, led him to places he had not planned to visit. These circumstances also meant he was at great distances from the churches he oversaw for very long periods of time. He was sometimes only able to send and receive one or two letters to communicate with them.

We know that he visited Macedonia but was driven out due to persecution (1Thess 2:14-16). This was not his choice but was “*torn away*” (2:17) from the brothers and sisters in Thessalonica, which was the major centre of Macedonia at the time. Because of this separation, Paul and Timothy were “*eager*” to see them face-to-face; they had “*great desire*” to see them; Paul wanted “*again and again*” to come to them, but Satan hindered their return (3:17-18).

Why was Paul so eager to meet these believers again? What caused him to seek to return with such earnestness and desire?

Paul regarded the existence of this body of believers as the result of the glorious work of the gospel of Jesus Christ through his apostolic work (2:19). Paul was called to proclaim the riches of the grace and love of God in Christ to the gentiles. The fact that these gentiles believed in Jesus was the demonstration of the reality of God’s grace and love, and proof that Paul’s apostolic work was authentic and God-ordained. Therefore, they were Paul’s “*hope or joy or crown of boasting*” before Jesus Christ; they are his “*glory and joy*” (2:19).

These believers were very precious to him, yet they were being afflicted and persecuted for their faith (3:4). These trophies of God’s grace were being attacked and harmed as a direct result of the effects of the grace of God in their life. All of us protect those things that are precious to us, and we all fear for the safety of those things when they are being attacked and we are unable to help. For Paul, there is nothing more precious than the work of mercy and grace in the lives of undeserving sinners.

This separation and concern was a heavy burden. So, when he “*could bear it no longer*” (3:5) he sent Timothy, his fellow worker, to do two things:

1. “*to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions*” (3:2-3)
2. “*to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labour would be in vain*” (3:5)

Paul’s greatest concern for the Thessalonians was that their faith be firm, established, strong and unmoved in the face of affliction. There was nothing that was more important than this since “*if you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all*” (Isa. 7:9).

But why would affliction be such a danger to faith? Paul was clearly concerned that they might be “*moved by these afflictions*” (2:3) and that the tempter might tempt them to abandon their faith. Why is this such a possibility?

What is faith? One key definition is that it is the “*conviction of things not seen*” (Heb. 11:1), things that cannot be seen with our physical, natural eyes. The mode of faith is not looking at the things that can be seen but to the things that are unseen (2Cor. 4:18). However, persecution and affliction are easily seen – they are obvious and impossible to ignore. Pain and difficulty are immediately felt and experienced. No faith is required to feel affliction. The danger is that it steals our attention away from what is unseen (the things of God) keeps our focus on what is seen (the things that afflict us).

What is unseen with human eyes, but only seen by faith? The fatherly goodness and love of God, and the perfectly wise outworking of his plan for his people can sometimes only be perceived by faith. Even God himself is unseen with human eyes in this life! The reality of our forgiveness, our justification, our adoption, our membership in the body of Christ – there are many, many things that can only be seen and grasped with the eyes of faith. So, Paul’s ultimate concern is to hear that the Thessalonian believers have not been distracted from these things by what can be seen but have maintained their resolute focus on what is unseen – the founder and perfecter of their faith, Jesus Christ (Heb. 12:2) and all that we have in him.

So, Paul sends Timothy to the Thessalonians to hear about how they were doing in the faith. In 3:6-13, we hear of Timothy’s report.

Thankfully, it was a good report. Timothy “*brought us the good news of your faith and love*” (3:6) and, consequently, “*in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith*” (3:7). No matter what else was happening around them and to them, they were firm in their faith. Other things matter, but nothing more than this.

Even though this was a great relief and reassurance for Paul, he still eagerly desired to meet with them. He prayed “*most earnestly night and day*” that he may see them “*face to face*” (3:10). And he provides the reason why he prayed this, despite Timothy’s good report: it was to “*provide what is lacking in your faith*” (3:10). It was not enough for Paul (and not for God) with the mere fact of faith, but he wanted to help grow their faith and increase it, through the work of God.

Paul realised that he could not do this via a letter. If he could, he would not have been so eager to meet them in person again. There is an important lesson here for us as we (hopefully) come out of “lockdown”. To be meeting each other once again in the same room will be such a delight for many different reasons. Many, if not all, of these reasons are legitimate and good. But one of the most important reasons is that God calls us to serve one another, to build one another up, to encourage one another, to exhort one another, etc. By God’s design, this can only be achieved effectively in-person, face-to-face. Zoom, email and social media can never fully mediate the work of God to each other as effectively as personal ministry can. God sent his Son into the world, not just a book about him. As Hebrews teaches us:

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Heb. 10:24-25)

Likewise, Paul says in Romans:

“I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.” (Rom 1:11-12)

Paul could do not this through a letter. Zoom won’t be sufficient either. There are benefits to both, as I’m sure we’ve all experienced. But it is God’s intention for the body of Christ to be together, serving together and sharing our lives together.

I hope and pray that you all are firm in your faith, holding fast to the glorious things that are unseen. I also hope and pray that your desire is to meet soon as a church – not just to fulfil our desire for social contact (although that’s a good thing in itself) but also to serve one another so that God may provide what is lacking in our faith. In this way, our grasp of what is unseen will keep us established, unmoved and joyful in every circumstance.

Grace and peace to you all.

Richard