

## 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 3:1-5 The Challenge of Being a Christian

Tease: It is in vogue today to tell people that if they become a Christian everything will be “just fine” in their world.

Unfortunately, this is a false doctrine that has resulted in many people getting very angry with God when they face problems and struggles after their salvation experience. Join us tomorrow at Friendship Grace Brethren Church for our worship service as Pastor Rich addresses the Challenges of Being a Follower of Jesus from First Thessalonians chapter 3. 9 am Sunday School and Worship at 10 am. If you cannot join us in person, please join us on line at [www.FriendshipGraceBrethren.com](http://www.FriendshipGraceBrethren.com).

## 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 3:1-5 The Challenge of Being a Christian

First let me say that Butch and Chuck did a fantastic job last week, thank you guys for great teaching from the word of God. I appreciate being allowed to be away last week and spend some time with my Dad. He seems to be failing fast now. They moved him to hospice Thursday night when he was no longer able to receive oral medicine. So I anticipate we will be making another trip out there soon.

We pick up our study of 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians this morning, moving on to chapter 3. However, chapter 3 does not stand isolated within the text; it is part of a larger narrative that begins in chapter 2 verse 17. So this morning I would like to start there.

*1 Thessalonians 2:17–20 (ESV)*

*17But 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,*

*18because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.*

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

*20For you are our glory and joy.*

When we worked through this text, we also spent some time in Acts chapter 17 where Dr. Luke reports on the missionary travels of the Apostle Paul and his team. Dr. Luke recorded that Paul and team were run out of Thessalonica by the Jewish leaders who had become offended by the success of the ministry in Thessalonica. The Jewish leaders thought they were losing control over the people and the town because so many were turning to Christ that they ran Paul and team out of town.

Jump over to the book of Acts chapter 17.

*Acts 17:10–15 (ESV)*

*10The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue.*

*11 Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.*

*12 Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.*

*13 But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.*

*14 Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there.*

*15 Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.*

So here is the time line. Paul and team escape from Thessalonica and head to Berea. Silas and Timothy remain in Berea and Paul is sent to Athens alone. Why Paul was sent is not specifically stated, but it seems prudent that Paul was being protected by “those who conducted him.”

If you read further in chapter 17 of the book of Acts you see that Paul was not just sitting around in Athens. Dr. Luke records that

Paul saw the idol for the unknown God and used that as an entry to preach to those gathered at the Areopagus. But even while preaching in Athens it appears that Paul's heart still ached for what he perceived as unfinished business in Thessalonica.

Paul waited in Athens for Silas and Timothy who apparently eventually came together with Paul in Athens. Timothy was dispatched back to Thessalonica and Silas was dispatched back to Macedonia, most likely to check on the church in Philippi. When Paul left Athens, he went on to Corinth where Silas and Timothy rejoined with Paul.

Now with that Historical context in mind lets go through our text this morning.

*1 Thessalonians 3:1 (ESV)*

*Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone,*

I think it is clear that Paul's focus was on building the church and not his own personal security or comfort. Paul says that he thought it the right course of action to get the players onto the field that were needed to build the church. Paul may have been temporarily sidelined in Thessalonica by being forced out of town, but that was not the end of it. Paul gave up his own comfort and security to get someone back to Thessalonica. Paul normally traveled with a team who aided him in ministry and I believe in personal matters as well. We know that the Apostle Paul had some physical infirmity, a "thorn in the flesh" as Paul

called it. It may be that team members helped him deal with the thorn in the flesh. Some scholars believe that it was his eyes which could mean that Paul needed someone to help get around. Others believe that Paul had malaria and often needed help with a fever and other problems associated with malaria.

Paul was willing to sacrifice so that the ministry could continue in Thessalonica and other places. This to me is the sign of a committed leader in God's ministry. Ministry should never be about the minister but about being obedient to God and His direction. It is more important that God is served and honored than for the ministry to be focused on the leader. That is why I repeatedly say my name will not be on the sign. That is why I have submitted myself to the leadership of the Council of Elders, who can fire me at any time they desire. Sometimes I wonder why they have not done that yet. This ministry here, this church, is not about Rich Schnieders it is about God, and we are obligated to do what He wants us to do. I must be willing to make any and every sacrifice God wants to accomplish the goals, He sets.

Paul sets the bar really high here as an example for the church leader. He sacrificed everything to accomplish the goals God gave him and the team. For local church leadership in 2017 to do any less is not to be obedient to God. I pray every day that I do what God wants us to do and that I listen to His direction and His mission. That is often in conflict with my own pride and even my own arrogance. I have to fight that frequently.

*1 Thessalonians 3:2 (ESV)*

*2and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's  
coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and  
exhort you in your faith,*

Willing to leave himself without any help in Athens, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica. I suspect Timothy received this assignment since he was young and probably not taken seriously by the Jews. Remember Paul later had to warn Timothy to not allow people to take advantage of his youth. Paul knew Timothy's training and experience and knew that he would be a great fit for the brand new church in Thessalonica.

Paul calls Timothy "his Brother." This statement by Paul suggests a couple of things to me. First, it suggests that Paul recognized that there had been a transformation in the life of Timothy after he joined the team. Paul acknowledged that Timothy was a fellow believer and even that he stood before God on the same plane as Paul did. Paul did not refer to Timothy as his young student or protege; he referred to him as his brother. Second, this seems to infer that Paul accepted him as one of the team, able to be deployed. This may have been Timothy's first mission assignment apart from the team. We know it had taken years before Timothy was given control of the team, at Paul imminent death, but here, early on he was on assignment. He had learned from Paul and then was released to teach in Thessalonica. That is what we often refer to as the

Paul/Timothy Model of leadership development. It is what we seek to do here if we can just get a young guy to stick around for awhile.

Paul also called Timothy “God’s Coworker.” I must point out that some manuscripts have the word deakanos or servant here rather than coworker. But the best manuscripts use co-worker.

Notice that Paul does not call Timothy his coworker, he calls him God’s Coworker. I could preach an entire sermon on just that reality. As leaders in the church we are coworkers with God. It is God who calls the shots and sets the plans, and we work along side of Him as He leads. Nothing effective can be accomplished if God is not in it. It is like what Rabbi Gamaliel told the Sanhedrin concerning the early church. If God is in it, we can defeat it and if He is not then it will fail. We are a team with God as the leader of the team, but still a team member. We forget that often. We forget that God must be part of the team or it will fail. We can do nothing effective without God.

Paul told the Corinthians the same thing:

*1 Corinthians 3:9 (ESV)*

*9For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.*

Dr. Knute Larson in his commentary on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians states: *This is the highest, most important position anyone can choose—to work together with the Lord in caring*

*about people, to spread the gospel, to love and encourage. Every day we have many opportunities to demonstrate this kind of lifestyle.<sup>1</sup>*

My own prayer is that I am recognized as a coworker of God and not the leader of the Rich Show. I want people who come in these doors, or view or listen on line to see Jesus Christ and Him crucified, buried and resurrected and not Rich. I want my Friends to know that I work with and for God not myself. I want the world to know that Friendship Grae Brethren Church is all about serving God and teaching His word. As John the Baptizer said He must increase and I must decrease.

*1 Thessalonians 3:3 (ESV)*

*3that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.*

Why was Paul sacrificing his own security and comfort and sending Timothy back to Thessalonica? So that no one in the new church in Thessalonica would be compromised by the trials and tribulations they were facing. Just imagine you were all excited about a new church you had been attending only to see three weeks in, that your pastor and his team had been run out of town. You would have to be questioning the wisdom of attending this church and turning your heart toward Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Knute Larson, *I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, vol. 9, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 39.

Maybe it is just better to go back to the way things were.  
Following Jesus is not real and did not work out.

That is the real danger in not properly teaching new believers about what it means to be a follower of Jesus, or not preparing them for the reality of spiritual warfare. Paul did not want to take a chance on some of the new church being harmed by the work of Satan that he sacrificed and sent Timothy back to them.

If you were working through this passage looking for principles, I think every one of us should see here that being a follower of Jesus does not guarantee rainbows and unicorns. Yet that is exactly what many people tell people in their witnessing. Come to Jesus, and everything will be fixed. In a spiritual way that is true. By coming to Jesus, your eternity is made sure that it will include eternity with Jesus in heaven. However, in a practical sense of the here and now coming to Jesus does not guarantee blessings and the end of struggle or problems, any more than going to an airport means you can fly like a bird.

I think where modern evangelism has gone wrong is that we have been focused on the wrong outcome. What is the anticipated outcome of evangelism? Is it eternal life or earthly life after salvation. For the world today the anticipated outcome is a better life as a follower of Jesus. But the reality is we should be focused on eternal life, after this life in the presence of Jesus.

Our life after coming to know Jesus is not about us but is about Him and serving Him as His doulos, slave. When Jesus

purchased you on the slave market of Sin, it was not so you could have everything you ever wanted. It is so that He could have everything He ever wanted, and that is His sheep who know His voice and follow Him.

You see we are focused on the wrong thing. It is not about us and never has been. It has always been about God and will always be. We are saved to serve Him, to glorify Him, to Honor Him. We serve, glorify and honor Him by being obedient to Him and by trusting Him to take us through the difficulties.

Look at the last phrase of the verse. Paul says we were destined for this. Destined for what? Destined for trials and tribulations. Destined for conflict with Satan. If you are a follower of Jesus in more than name only then there are going to be challenges and difficulties. You are going to struggle, and you are going to be challenged by Satan at every turn. Like I have told you before if you are not experiencing this, then it would seem that Satan is not very concerned with you.

*1 Thessalonians 3:4 (ESV)*

*4For 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.*

For three weeks, Paul was leading them to Christ and telling them that trials and tribulations were coming their way. His words were predictive when he was with them but now those same words have been proven correct and accurate. The young

church in Thessalonica had already had a rough start. Their spiritual father was run out of town. The Jewish leadership attempted to take control of them and shut them down. We know from historical sources that early Christians often suffered loss of families and job. They lost the ability to operate in the marketplace and to transact business. This left them hungry and struggled to care for themselves and their families. We have never had that kind of response to our coming to know the Lord. But they did. To come to know the Lord then often resulted in a loss of every thing.

Churches today often shy away from teaching anything difficult or deep, especially early in the life of the church so that they do not drive people away. But look at the example Paul sets here. In the three weeks, he was with them leading them to know the Lord he was also teaching them about the reality that being a follower of Jesus would result in trials and tribulations. Paul did not wait to take through all the easy stuff first. He did not just teach all the things that would make them feel warm and fuzzy. No, right from the very beginning he taught them the truth of what being a follower of Jesus would be like.

I think Paul sets a good example for us today. It is one reason that I like to teach through books of the Bible rather than topically. First of all, when we go through a book, you know where we will be the next Sunday, and you read ahead to get the grammatical context of the passage each week. We are also forced to deal with every issue brought up in the text. Unless we

just skip over sections, which I am not willing to do, we must confront all that God has presented in the text.

One of the dangers with topical messages is that you do not get the fullness of scripture, you only get small sections, and that is not good. I so appreciate that so many of you participate in the daily reading and make it through the Bible every year. You get more and more familiar with the complete counsel of the Word of God and not just some small portions I want to talk about.

Sure, we run the danger of someone not understanding the text when a new believer is taught deeper stuff. But that is my job to make sure that it is presented in a way that anyone can understand. But guess what? You may not get it the first time, or the second time or every the 10<sup>th</sup> or hundredth time. Sometimes it takes awhile to get it. I have the same problem. Sometimes I miss what God is saying in a text and need to hear it several times until I do get it. We can not; we must not lower our teaching to the point that everyone gets it the first time. There would be no teaching, and there would be no growth. Paul taught the hard truths of the reality of the life of a follower of God right from the beginning. We are going to follow His example here.

*1 Thessalonians 3:5 (ESV)*

*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.*

Paul recognized that some of them would not have understood the deeper truths he presented to them in the three weeks he was with them. He knew we all operate at different levels and learn at different rates in different ways. So he had to get someone to them to help them and to report back to him that they got it. But notice in this verse why this was important to him. It was not because if they did not get it he would look bad as a teacher or preacher. No it had nothing to do with him. His concern was for them that they might have been tempted by Satan to return to their old life and leave the following of Jesus. His concern was not for himself but them and their relationship with Jesus.

What a true spiritual giant Paul is. He was always focused on serving God and doing what God wanted him to do. He was never focused on his own needs or even his own reputation. He was focused on God and serving Him, nothing else.

## Conclusion

We have unpacked quite a bit of stuff from this short paragraph. Let me see if I can boil it down into bite size chunks for us to ruminate on today.

1. Following Jesus will result in difficulty
2. We all need to know and recognize the reality there will be difficulty

3. We must recognize that Satan opposes those who follow Jesus
4. The mission of the church must always be to teach the complete word of God not picking and choosing the part we like
5. That teaching must begin at the beginning
6. Our focus must always be on God and not us.

Paul has established such a good example for us as a church and as a church leader. From the very beginning teach the complete word of God, even, or may especially, the difficult parts. Follow Jesus as individuals and as a church. Know that Satan will attack us and recognize that those attacks mean that we are following God and not Satan.

Let's Pray!