

1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-13

“THE BELIEVER’S SURVIVAL KIT”

John of Antioch was a short, wiry fellow. He had a large bald head and sunken cheeks. There was nothing imposing about his appearance. But when John opened his mouth to preach God’s Word, nations and kings trembled. His message was always powerful, and uncompromising. History knows *John of Antioch* by a nickname, “Chrysostom” or “golden mouthed.” Chrysostom was one of the early church’s greatest preachers.

But it was his bold and unbending preaching that got him arrested. The Roman Emperor and Empress were offended by John’s strong stand against sin. He was called into their palace and ordered to cease his preaching. If Chrysostom refused he would be banished from the empire... John’s encounter with the Emperor has become legendary!

Standing before the powerful Ruler, John Chrysostom answered his threat... “Sire, you cannot banish me, for the world is my Father’s house.” The Emperor snapped back... “Then I will slay you...” “No, you cannot, for my life is hid with Christ in God.” “Then your treasures will be confiscated...” “Sire, my treasures are in heaven, where none can break in and steal.” “Then I will drive you from man, and you will have no friends left...” “That you cannot do, either, for I have a Friend in heaven who has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’” Sadly, John was banished to the edges of the empire, and his body gave out on the hard journey into exile.

If you’d been alive at the time you might’ve concluded that the Emperor won the showdown. An evil man was able to silence God’s *golden mouth*. Chrysostom’s martyrdom seemed to be a sad end to a glorious life. Yet God sees it differently! Psalm 116 tells us, “Precious in the sight of the LORD, is the death of His saints.” *God even has a plan for persecution.*

God is in control of all things... and apparently He sees a purpose in our affliction. He subjects his kids to resistance training. He allows opposition. The surest way for a parent to ruin a kid is to protect him from all things difficult. Shelter him completely, and he’ll never learn to cope with life. Likewise, God knows faith grows stronger when we get some push back.

In his book, “When Life is Hard,” James MacDonald shares a helpful illustration. He refers to his basketball days. He played lots of round ball, and had a lot of sprained ankles. He learned how to treat a fresh sprain... James would grab a wastebasket, fill it with ice, and top it off with water. Then he’d stick his wounded ankle into the frigid water and leave it there. James writes that after a minute in the ice his foot would become “crazy painful...” But if he kept it in the cold for 2 minutes, his recovery time was cut in half... Hang on for 2½ minutes, and he’d be playing again within the week... But if he could endure the cold for 3 minutes, he was walking on his ankle the next day... Hey, *the longer the pain the faster the healing!* And this is what happens through the pain of persecution. *Affliction becomes accelerated discipleship.* If you want to be Christ-like, hardship is like miracle grow. Faith develops faster when it’s subjected to some pain.

Yet this is tough for some of us to except. *We want to believe it just ain’t so...* Even those of us who know better, will draw the wrong conclusions... *We assume a believer who’s down-and-out must’ve sinned along the way... For a church to be struggling it had to have swerved from God’s will... If God were pleased we’d see His blessings in some tangible way...* We think the Christian should always come out on top....

The job opening ought to go to the believer... The employee who puts God first should get the promotion... The honest, godly coach should win the game! *But that's not always how life pans out... God has a plan for affliction!*

In the first two chapters of this letter, Paul writes of the Thessalonians in nothing but glowing terms... He recalls their *work of faith, labor of love, patience of hope*. They turn from idols to the living God. The Word of God *sounded out from Thessalonica through all the surrounding region*. They *received the word of God... which effectively works in (those) who believe*. This was a healthy, influential church - *yet they still took it on the chin!* The enemies of the Gospel play rough. They pile on and eye poke. Like a Gator linebacker they take cheap shots... After gathering up *some new believers into a new church* – Paul was able to remain in Thessalonica for just a mere three weeks. Hostile opposition ran the apostle out of town.

In one of his letters, John Chrysostom, *Ole Golden Mouth* himself, wrote these words, "*When you see the church scattered, suffering the most terrible trials, her most illustrious members persecuted and flogged, her leader carried away into exile, don't only consider these events, but also the things that have resulted: the rewards, the recompense, the awards for the athlete who wins in the games and the prizes won in the contest.*" Chrysostom reminds us we see only the struggle... It's like predicting a winner after a tough third quarter... *It ain't over till it's over!* There's more game to be played. The prizes aren't awarded until the end of the contest. And this is what we need to remember in the midst of affliction. If the world hated our Lord and persecuted Jesus, they'll do the same to His followers. This was true of Paul, the Thessalonians, and it's true of us.

In Chapter 3 Paul is in a tough spot! He's discouraged and needs a faith lift.... Paul is also interacting with a church that's in a tough spot!... The Thessalonians were under the gun. Paul wants their faith to survive... 1 Thessalonians 3 is **the believer's survival kit**. These verses contain help for Christians under fire. A person facing affliction needs three-fold help. They need **a person, a post, and a prayer**. And when the world plays rough with us– when we take it on the chin - we also need... **a caring person, a loving post, and a passionate prayer**.

Paul begins in verse 1, "**Therefore, when we could no longer endure it...**" In essence, he's saying, "**we couldn't stand not knowing any longer...**" This was before instant communication... *Twitter, and Facebook, and Texting*. Paul had birthed a church that was under attack, and he'd been forced to leave it prematurely. He was longing to know how they'd fared.

Imagine a new mom separated from her baby... I don't know if it still happens this way, but when Kathy birthed our last kid, the doc pulled Mack from the birth canal - plopped him up on mom's tummy - handed me the scissors to cut the cord - then gave us a few moments with our son... *Kath held the baby, while I snapped the photos*. After a while they rolled Kath to her room, while they rolled the baby off to get formally measured and checked out. *And there was a bit of a wait*. It wasn't long. Mack was back in our arms in no time. *But what if there had been a delay?* Mom would've gotten antsy. Dad would've been pacing... The longer the wait the greater the tension. This is what Paul experienced. He had to know what was happening to his baby church...

He writes, "**Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ...**" When Paul left Thessalonica he traveled to Berea - then on to Athens. The Greek capitol was *Idol World*. There were as many idols in Athens as there were people. *And in such a spiritually oppressive atmosphere, I'm sure Paul was glad to have Timothy around for fellowship!* He was needed reinforcements. Tim was a "**brother!**" He shared Paul's heart. The

two were tight... Tim was a “*minister*” or “*a humble servant*” – he shared Paul’s style. Nothing flashy or haughty, just a roll up your shirtsleeves kind of guy... And Tim was “*a laborer in the Gospel*” - he shared Paul’s mission..

Timothy was going to be a great asset to Paul’s ministry in Athens... But Paul couldn’t stand not knowing about that baby church in Thessalonica. It was a beautiful, unselfish gesture when Paul interrupted his plans for Athens in order to send his best man back to check on that little group of new believers. *His care for the Thessalonians cost Paul personally...*

Dave Marini was a great blessing to our church, but God also loves Tar Hills, so He sent Dave and Michele to Chapel Hill, NC to plant a fellowship. Kevin and Randy blessed us, but they were needed across the pond... I love Josh’s worship, but there was a wounded church in Woodstock... Even this morning it costs us here to have Pastor Zach up at Calvary 316 – but always remember, *God’s plan reads “go” and not “woe.”* He’s always sending people out to do *new works* in *new places*. And if we love our neighbors... we cannot begrudge sending them the people we love.

I’m sure Paul enjoyed hanging out with Timothy, but he put a friendship on hold for the good of the Gospel. *And I wish I saw more of this in church.* Church-folk tend to gravitate toward people they like – other folks with common interests. But like Paul we need to think of the greater good. If not, we end up *a clique*, not *a church*. The Body of Christ can suffer from ingrown hairs. Believers turn inward, and leave no room for newcomers. Paul and Tim sacrificed some *friendship* to help the larger *fellowship*.

It’s interesting to me that whenever Paul heard of a church fighting false doctrine he responded with a **letter**, but when the problem was persecution he sent a **leader** – *a person*. Here he sends them his sidekick, Timothy. Later Paul will write two letters to the Thessalonians. We’re reading his first. He wrote to fill in their doctrine and clear up a few misunderstandings. But before Paul pens *a correspondence*, he first sends **a person**. He realizes the new believers in Thessalonica need some flesh and blood.

Understand, *Christian ministry* is always “*Incarnational ministry.*” Jesus set the example. He was “*God Incarnate - Almighty God in human form – God in flesh and blood.*” God is Spirit, but according to Hebrews 10:5, the Son of God says, “*a body You have prepared for Me...*” God knew that to communicate with us He’d have to do more than write on stone tablets. For us to grasp it, His Word would need to be visible, and touchable, and personal. Thus, the Word became flesh – the Almighty became *one of us*. God became a man, and moved into the neighborhood.

It reminds me of the little girl who was scared of thunderstorms. Her parents were tired of her running into their room and jumping in bed with them every time she heard a thunder crack and rain hit the roof. They insisted she stay in her own bed, and not be afraid. In fact, her mother told her that God was with her. She should to trust the Lord for His protection. One night a thunderstorm rolled in and at the first sound of thunder the little girl was at the foot of mom and dad’s bed. The little girl quivered, “*I know I’m suppose to trust God, but I need somebody with some skin on.*”

And God knows us... That’s why He continues to speak with skin on... Today the Church – you and I – are “*the body of Christ.*” We’re “*God’s hands and feet.*” “*His mouthpiece.*” “*The only Bible some people will read.*”

Think about this in your own life... When you first came to Jesus you probably knew very little Bible. In fact, when you tried to read, it was tough sledding. Your theology, and beliefs, and standards were infantile at best. Yes, the Holy Spirit is our teacher, and we need to learn to hear the Spirit's still small voice. But for most of us our first teacher was a pastor or friend – *somebody with skin on*. Spiritual sensitivities are slow to develop.

Doctors say a baby's vision is still maturing even after he or she is born. It takes several months for a baby's eyes to focus as clearly as an adult. The muscles around the eye, and the brain's processing has to mature. And the same is true with a spiritual newbie. When a person becomes a Christian God opens spiritually blind eyes. *We see our sin and God's love. We view ourselves and life differently* – but we still need the help of other believers until our vision begins to mature.

Paul will send a letter, but before he does he sends a Timothy. The Thessalonians not only needed preaching and teaching – they also needed a pastor, a mentor, a friend – they needed fellowship. They needed a person to take them by the hand and help them apply the truth.

I'm convinced this is where the church so often fails in its mission. We become a clearing house of information without providing folks the opportunity to grapple with a truth. Folks need to be helped and challenged to work through the implications and practically apply the truths they learn. It's one thing to hear a biblical principle and even know it intellectually. It's quite another thing to incorporate that truth into how I think and live. What would this *look like in my family* – or in *my work situation*? The best way to get a *picture* is through a *person*. Fellowship with other believers gives me a peek at what this might look like in my life. I can anticipate the obstacles and rewards. I'm not as fearful of the application.

And this is why everybody at CC should work to be part of a **TBG** – a **Through The Bible Group**. *Understand the importance of this concept...* You cannot read the NT without walking away with the notion that Christianity is a communal experience. It's to be lived out in *relation* to each other - not *isolation*. Hear me, to grow a Christian it takes *biblical knowledge* and *genuine fellowship*. One without the other is insufficient. If your faith is going to survive persecution you need a Timothy.

In verse 2 Paul describes the purpose of Tim's visit to Thessalonica, **"to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith..."** Notice, what comes first... We need to be **"established"** - before we get **"encouraged."** If not, you can encourage someone down the wrong path.

Let's say you're into fishing... you're always heading to the lake to bait a hook. But in the process you neglect your wife, and kids and work... *to fish*. Then I come along and encourage you - *pray that God will cause the fish to bite*. What I should be praying is that God send you home empty handed. That He'll puts a bump in the road that will correct your priorities. When you get established in the right direction, then I can cheer you on.

Thankfully, Paul didn't have this worry with the Thessalonians. They were on the right path – Timothy was sent to encourage and steady them. He writes in verse 3, **"That no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know."** Timothy's job was to remind these new believers that affliction and hardship isn't some spiritual aberration, or a sign that's something's wrong. To the contrary, persecution is an indicator you're on the right track. *A true Christian can expect some stormy seas.*

Notice, Paul's statement in verse 4 - "we are appointed" to afflictions. I'm sure your calendar is full of appointments – *to get your hair cut, or see the doctor, or make a sales call, or meet with your child's teacher* – but I hate to tell you, every Christian also has an appointment with affliction.

It reminds me of a man who died and went to heaven. The angel at the gate asked him if he'd done any righteous acts in his life? The man replied, "Well, once I tried help a little old lady" The angel said, "Tell me about it?" The man answered, "I saw a biker, a Hell's Angel – a brute and bully – he was beating up this little old lady, so I stepped in. I kicked him in the shins - told the lady to run for help - I even tried to punch him in the nose." The angel was impressed, "Wow, what an act of bravery, how long ago did the incident occur?" The man answered, "About two minutes ago!" Stand up for what's right, and you'll encounter some affliction.

In John 16:33 Jesus promises, "In the world you will have tribulation." In Acts 14 Paul encouraged the churches of Galatia to continue in their faith - for "we must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."

Later Paul makes a promise to Timothy.... I'm sure you know the Bible is full of wonderful promises. We like to print them out and tape the verses to the refrigerator, and memorize them, and quote them frequently... *but 2 Timothy 3:12 is not one of these verses.* Here's a text that isn't what most of us would refer to as "refrigerator material" - *yet it's a biblical promise nonetheless.* God promises Timothy, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."

The Voice of the Martyrs, a watchdog group that tracks persecution against Christians, reported that this past September 25th a 17 year old Somalia teenager was beheaded by Muslim radicals for his faith in Christ. In October an Indonesian pastor was arrested and sentenced to three months in jail for his efforts to reach out to his community for Jesus. On September 19 a young Burmese girl was locked in her house and told to choose between her faith and family. Recant her Christianity or she would be sent to a remote village. The young girl escaped and ran away. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. I could go on for days...

American Christians are so guilty of taking our freedom for granted we don't realize that persecution against Christians is the single greatest human rights violation on this planet. Today, 200 million Christians in 60 countries are denied basic civil liberties for no other reason than their faith. *Gospel for Asia* estimates that 40,000 Christians a year are martyred for their faith. That's 110 believers every day. That means during our service today six followers of Jesus will die because of their allegiance to the Lord. The freedom we have in America is the exception rather than the rule. Jesus promised us we'd be *eternally blessed, and constantly in trouble.*

In fact, if persecution became as harsh and as common in our country as it is elsewhere in the world, I wonder how it would thin out our ranks? *How would it effect you?* If your allegiance to Jesus suddenly came at a heavy cost, would you remain as devoted and as bold in your witness?

This is Paul's concern for the Thessalonians in verse 5, "For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain." Again, Paul is worried about the survival of their faith. He doesn't

want them to give up and renounce Jesus. If that happened his efforts among them would be for naught. *Notice, the implication...* It's not enough to *have faith* to be saved – we need to *continue in our faith*.

Paul is concerned that Satan will use the persecution as an opportunity to “*tempt*” or “*stir up doubt*” in their hearts. Satan often uses pain and fear to cloud our judgment, and twist our theology. *Scripture... God... life... commitment... circumstances...* look very different through the fog of pain. This is another reason we need a Timothy during tough times. A flesh and blood friend can shake us out of our stupor and remind us of the truth. All Christians grow bolder when they can feed off the faith of a friend.

Remember, to save the Thessalonians Paul sends them Timothy. This is why the question is so important... *Is there a Timothy or two in your life?* Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word, but sometimes the continuance of our faith is supported by a Timothy we can touch and see.

Paul sent the Thessalonians *a person*, but they send him back **a post**. Verse 6, “*But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you...*” Understand help flowed both ways – from *Paul to the Thessalonians*, but from *the Thessalonians to Paul*. Timothy's news encouraged Paul. Paul's enemies had told vicious lies about him, and had tried to discredit his ministry. He was glad when Timothy told him the Thessalonians didn't buy it - they refused to listen. They had a “*good remembrance*” of Paul.

Paul continues, “*Therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.*” Let me use an internet term and refer to Timothy's report as *a post!* It was his post that pumped new life into a discouraged Paul. Since saying goodbye to Timothy in Athens, Paul's ministry had been tough sledding. His time in Athens had yielded minimal results. When he moved on to Corinth, he discovered the work was every bit as hard. The Greeks he witnessed to were tough nuts to crack. They were steeped in idolatry and opposed to the idea of resurrection. In Corinth, Paul was on the mat - down for the count. Paul was *toast* - until Timothy's *post*.

The news that the Church in Thessalonica was standing fast and actually growing - *despite their persecution* - recharged Paul's batteries! Listen to Paul's words, “*Now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.*” Paul is concluding, if it can happen in Thessalonica after just three weeks, it can happen in Corinth. I'm just getting started. I can't give up! A simple post made all the difference in its recipient's perspective.

Did you see the news article this past week? The headline read, “*You may have 250 Facebook Friends, but only two are close pals...*” A Cornell University study reveals the average person only has two close friends. That's down from *three* in a 1985 survey. *We're losing ground.* Here's a line from the article, “*Even though social media helps us connect with more people, there are fewer people we lean on when it comes to intimate matters.*” Apparently, 140 characters in a tweet doesn't take the place of a couple of friends sitting down and sharing their hearts.

Never underestimate what it'll do for a friend to hear from you. Let them know you care - Let them hear you're okay - Tell them, if you're doing well. Nothing bolsters me more than to hear that I'm having an ongoing influence in another person's life. When Tim returned with news of the believer's progress it renewed Paul. *A post got him through a rough patch.*

Folks struggling with persecution need *a person, a post* – and a *prayer*. This was also part of the help that flowed from Paul to the Thessalonians... Verse 9, “*For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God, night and day praying exceedingly...*” The greatest service we can render a persecuted Christian is to pray “*night and day.*” It’s ironic, but today has been labeled by many churches as “*The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.*” Let me encourage you to take a moment *today and every day* to pray for the believers who are being hassled, and imprisoned, and tortured...

I read a quote this week from *Gospel For Asia* founder, KP Yohannan. KP writes, “*I often talk to people who have been beaten and tortured for their faith. They don’t want sympathy or praise or even a way out of the difficult situation. They all have the same request: “Please pray for me.”*”

This is what Paul did – he prayed for the Thessalonians. He prayed, “*That we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith?*” Here’s the heart of a gracious pastor. Paul knows the Church in Thessalonica isn’t *a perfect church* – its members aren’t *perfect Christians*. They had holes in their faith – gaps in their understanding – there were concepts yet to be grasped. Paul wanted to complete what was lacking in their faith. Here’s the point, Paul was *sticking with them - praying for them*. Paul would see them soon – face to face. They wouldn’t be forgotten.

I hope you realize the more you get to know me, *the more you’ll find that’s lacking*. I’m also a guy with some holes that need to be filled up... We’ve all got holes in our life – that’s why *I need you to stick with me*, and you need *me to stick with you*... We all need to pray for one another...

And Paul shows us how... Beginning in verse 11 he conveys a model prayer. “*Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you...*” Earlier, in 2:18 Paul said he wanted to visit the Thessalonians, but “*Satan hindered us.*” Here he prays for God to remove the satanic obstacles, and direct his way to the believers in Thessalonica. “*And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you...*” Paul tells us to pray for an “*increase*” - but not an increase in *pay*, or *promotion*... Paul tells us to pray that we’ll “*increase and abound*” in love for one another – even in love for this lost world. Don’t pray for a *bigger nest egg* – pray for a *bigger heart!*

And this is a common prayer of mine. I grew up around so many people who had *a closed mind and a small heart*. Over the years I’ve prayed for *an open mind and big heart*. I want to be big-hearted - a big-grace guy! God treats people with *big-grace*. I also want to be a *big-grace guy!*

And Paul closes his prayer in verse 13... “*So that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.*” Notice that each chapter in 1 Thessalonians ends with a verse about the return of Jesus... In fact, the NT speaks more about Jesus’ second coming than nearly any other subject. Like Paul, Jesus left a baby church that was under attack – and he wants us to know He hasn’t forgotten us. *He’s coming for us*... One day He’ll right all wrongs. He’ll persecute our persecutors... But until then, He wants our faith to survive! That’s why we need *a person, a post, a prayer*. *Be and seek a Timothy*... *Post your love and appreciation to the people in your life*... *And then pray - pray that your love will increase and abound*...