

A PERSEVERING SPIRIT

SERIES: SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY, GROWING CHURCH

By Danny Hall

We are continuing our series of studies in 1 Thessalonians. I love this book. The interplay between Paul and the church in Thessalonica is so instructive and encouraging. In the first half of the book Paul deals almost entirely with his personal relationship with the Thessalonians—describing the birth of their church, his ministry among them, his longing for them, and his prayers for them. In this message we are going to finish the first half of the book.

In the final section of the first half of the book, Paul gives us perhaps his most personal message yet. He really opens up his heart and pours out his feelings for these people. In doing so he gives us a wonderful picture of how the body of Christ can work together. Sometimes Paul is characterized as a flaming evangelist, aggressively conquering the world, and perhaps we might conclude from that that he was a hard-driving, take-the-next-hill kind of guy. Certainly he was a pioneer in his missionary work, but Paul had a wonderful, tender heart toward the people God put in his life.

So in our text we'll see some key things in his relationship with them, and beyond that, the circumstances in which he and the Thessalonians were living will give us yet another good look at what a strong, healthy church can be about. Let's read 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10:

But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us. For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.

Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. 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 also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain. 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. 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, as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?

In 2:13-16 Paul spoke of the incredible persecution they had gone through. Remember, in Acts 17 when Paul and his friends came to Thessalonica and began to preach the gospel and a new church was born, almost immediately a great persecution arose from the Jews who didn't accept Christ, who were angry that Paul and his friends had come to lead these people into what they thought was some crazy new sect.

They recruited some of the local thugs of the city to come and start a great persecution, and eventually Paul was run out of town. (See Discovery Paper 4858.) Now from 1 Thessalonians 3 we understand that this persecution continued, and Paul was greatly concerned for these believers.

In this passage we have a wonderful perspective on two things: Paul's heart for the Thessalonians, and the background of what was going on in their lives. Let's look first at Paul's steadfast love for them.

Steadfast love

Paul pours out his heart to them at this point. His absolute, passionate commitment to them comes through unmistakably. There are three specific ways his love for them was manifested.

First, he was willing to sacrifice for them. At the beginning of chapter 3 he says, "Therefore when we could endure it [not being able to hear from them or come to them] no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother...to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith...." Now, on the surface that doesn't seem to be such a big thing, but let me remind you of what was going on in Paul's life at this point. Not long after his time in Thessalonica, he ended up in Athens all alone, having sent everyone in his entourage off to do different things; and then he came to Corinth (Acts 17-18). Corinth is where he wrote this letter. When writing later to the Corinthians, Paul talks about how he came to them in fear and trembling (1 Corinthians 2:1-3). Now, we don't picture Paul as being in fear and trembling, but that's exactly how he describes himself at that time, because he was ministering alone.

For many years I had the privilege of participating in a ministry in Eastern Europe. I traveled a lot, primarily in Poland. On most of those trips someone else went along with me. There were usually at least two of us, and sometimes more. Those trips would be wonderful times of ministry, and traveling together on the road was a great time of enrichment and fellowship. But once in a while I would make those ministry trips by myself, and then my travels were long and lonely. I would be meeting with friends I loved dearly and enjoyed being around, but there was just something different about it when I had to travel and minister by myself.

I'm sure Paul understood that as well. That's why he took a band of people with him. He was discipling them, but he was also involving them in ministry and enjoying working with them as part of the body of Christ. Paul was so concerned about the spiritual health of the Thessalonians, though, that he chose to be alone in ministry, in what turned out to be a couple of very tough situations in Athens and then at the beginning of his time in Corinth, so that he could send Timothy to check on the Thessalonians. Paul absolutely loved these people, so he was willing to sacrifice for them.

Second, Paul's love for them was manifested in his relentless drive to see them spiritually prosper. Notice the repeated references throughout this text:

"We wanted to come to you...."

"We sent Timothy...to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith...."

"I also sent to find out about your faith...."

"What thanks can we render to God for you...as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?"

This theme runs all the way through this text.

I have often wondered how deep my commitment to people is. You know, ministry is not terribly convenient. It can be very messy and time-consuming. It can run right into our own sense of what we want to be doing at any given time. Yet the reality of being involved in people's lives means that our life

is no longer our own. People have needs, and sometimes God calls us to be involved with them right at the moment.

Because of Paul's passion for the Thessalonians, he wasn't saying, "Oh, I can't be bothered with them, I've got work to do in the next city." His pursuit of their spiritual growth, as I said, was relentless. He wanted to see them prosper spiritually, and he never stopped thinking about it and praying about it. His constant attitude toward other people was, "How can I help you walk more closely with Christ?"

How many of us have that kind of relationship with others? Do we really care that people would come to the Lord, and then grow in that faith? Is that what motivates us as we make decisions about how we relate to them?

The third way Paul's love for the Thessalonians was manifested was in his absolute joy in them. There are a couple wonderful passages in this text that speak to this. In 2:19-20 he says, "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy." Paul is saying, "What am I going to be most excited about when I stand before the Lord? It's going to be you, that God let me be part of bringing you to Christ and establishing you in Christ. What an incredible joy and praise that God has used me in your lives!"

During my earlier years of ministering in Poland, in the mid-eighties, I was asked to be one of the main speakers at a conference for all of the Baptist youth leaders. At the conference I met the national director for youth work for the Baptist denomination, a man named Peter who was finishing his graduate studies in theology in Warsaw. Peter and I became fast friends. Over the next few years, almost every time I went to Poland I spent time with him. I visited him many times at the tiny apartment he and his wife and little daughter lived in. We would often talk and pray for hours and hours about ministry and what God was doing. I was trying to help him grow in his ministry. I wasn't much older than Peter at the time, and I look back and wonder, "Who was I to be a mentor to him?" But God had placed me in that relationship.

One night I left his apartment quite late. I decided not to take the public transportation or a taxi, and I was walking through the cold night air back to my guest room at the national headquarters of the Baptist Union. I remember that night vividly. The whole way back, my heart was incredibly full of joy. I was praying and praising God and thanking him for the richness of our fellowship and the richness of what God was doing through Peter's life, and for allowing me to play a small part in encouraging him and helping him grow in his ministry.

Paul's love for the Thessalonians is expressed in this same kind of exuberant joy. In 3:7-9 he repeats this idea: "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. 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...?" This joy for those whom God allowed Paul to minister to was a constant aspect of his life.

So it was just eating him alive that he could not be with them. His heart was so passionate for them, yet he was separated from them. How could he find out how they were doing, what was going on? Even though he couldn't get immediate information, he loved them, prayed for them, and did everything he could to make sure they were encouraged and strong in their faith.

We have to ask ourselves whether we have that kind of heart for people. Do we look at the people in our world with that kind of incredible, steadfast love and commitment? Do we do whatever we can for their spiritual well-being, to see them come to Christ and grow in him? Do we move whatever mountains we need to move and pray as long as we have to pray and love in ways that are sacrificial in order to build

up the body of Christ?

Let's look now at the background of what was going on in their lives.

The spiritual battle

What Paul saw really happening in all this persecution was that this was a war. That was part of the reason for the separation from each other and the problems they were having and the struggles in their faith that he was concerned about. These people were in a real spiritual battle. Paul draws our attention to several ways this battle was manifested.

First, it was manifested in the direct persecution that they endured because of their faith in Christ. They were physically threatened. Some had lost their lives. They had been dragged off to jail. Paul himself had been run out of town. Sometimes the spiritual war that we are in manifests itself that way.

A few months ago we were privileged to have Brother Andrew visit our church. He told many stories about the suffering church around the world. That's the part of the body of Christ to whom Brother Andrew has committed himself to minister for fifty years now. I get his newsletters, and in the June newsletter he identified the top three places where Christians are persecuted around the world: North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Vietnam. In a story about the situation in North Korea, he wrote:

“Standing at the top of the list of infamy is North Korea, one of the most repressed and isolated countries on earth today. Ruled by a brutal communist regime that craves secrecy, almost no information about the church has reached the West over the past decades. But recently, a small stream of refugees fleeing from famine have reported that the church is not only alive in North Korea, it is growing—and may number up to 400,000 people!

Because the communist regime considers Christians to be political criminals, the police try to force Christians to renounce Christ and worship founder Kim Il Sun. If believers stay faithful, they are often executed—with several hundred Christians perishing in 2002 alone. Many other believers are enduring imprisonment and torture.” (1)

This kind of direct persecution is not something we ourselves live with day by day in this time and place. But many believers around the world face this.

Second, the spiritual battle was manifested in the way Paul's efforts to minister to them were hampered, hindered, or shortened. Paul describes his frustration at not being able to be with them, and he attributes this directly to the work of the devil himself. In 2:18 he says, “We wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us.” We don't know exactly how that happened; perhaps it was simply that Paul had been banished from the town.

Now, I am not someone who sees a demon behind every bush. A lot of us, while we say we believe in the reality of spiritual warfare, in fact go to the other extreme, where we don't ever acknowledge the reality of it. But Paul clearly understood that the frustration of his plans was part of the spiritual battle.

How many times have you wanted to reach out to somebody, perhaps invite a friend to church, and invitations were accepted and plans were made, and then something came up to make it so that the person couldn't show up? How many times have you wanted to start a conversation with somebody about spiritual things, or develop a relationship with somebody around spiritual things, and it didn't go right? Why is it that the craziest morning to get up and get ready is Sunday morning? Well, maybe it's

partly because we're inept in our own planning, but I think we underestimate the subtlety and power of the spiritual battle that we are in to frustrate our efforts to minister. Paul understood that and prayed strongly against it. In other places in his letters, particularly Ephesians 6, he makes reference to the reality of the spiritual battle we are in and calls us to stand against the powers of darkness.

Finally, the spiritual battle is manifested in the ongoing temptation to lose heart. Look at 3:5: "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." He understood that in our day-to-day life there is enormous pressure against our efforts to live in a way that pleases God, to figure out what it means to be the people of God. We do that in the face of opposition, persecution, many subtle ways that Satan trips us up and frustrates our plans for spiritual growth, and all the ways that we are tempted in our flesh to follow after things that aren't godly. Paul understood that this battle can wear us down to the point of despair.

Sometimes people say that if you just become a Christian, all your problems are going to get better. As wonderful and beautiful as it is to come to faith in Christ, to know the freedom of forgiveness and God's grace in our lives, it is simply not true that coming to Christ makes everything easy. We all know that experientially. The reality is that many times our problems get worse! Life can get more difficult, more demanding, because we are living in the middle of a spiritual battle. Paul recognized that this was what was going on, so his heart's desire was for them to persevere through it, and all his energy and love were directed toward helping them.

What are some applications of this teaching for us?

Being prepared for the battle

First of all, let's think about some of the arenas of opposition that you and I face. Most of us do not face open hostility the way the Thessalonians did or the Christians in North Korea do. But the truth is that if we live faithfully for Christ, we will run into opposition. Sometimes it's as subtle as derision from people around us who think we've gone off our rocker just by believing the gospel. Sometimes family members or friends isolate us. Sometimes the opposition is more direct. If we think through our family structure or work place or school, we will realize that there are people who oppose what we believe. What we have to do is recognize those arenas of opposition and begin to pray for God's strength and wisdom to know how to live in the midst of that.

Second, we need to ask how significant relationships and ministry in our lives are being marginalized by the distractions of this world and Satan's interference. Do we understand that this is part of the battle and pray against it, and pray for God's strength and direction? All of us should be able to think of people we are trying to reach out to, either to encourage them in their faith or to encourage them to come to faith. Our lives ought to be directed toward others. Therefore we ought to all be able to identify those areas where the frustration is coming and begin to pray earnestly for wisdom about how to work through those frustrations and patiently continue to steadfastly love people.

Third, there is the daily grind of life for all of us. I know there are times when you're so weary, even of the daily grind of your spiritual life, that you groan, "Oh, I just can't go forward today." I think Paul wants us to be aware of that in the context of the spiritual battle that we are in, so we need to prepare ourselves.

What we can glean from this text is the third characteristic of a healthy, growing church. The first was a vital connection with God. The second was a deep reliance on the word of God. And the third is

perseverance in the face of all obstacles.

How do we become people who persevere? The opposition will come, so we'd better be prepared. In the book of 1 Thessalonians Paul points to three powerful tools we have to prepare ourselves for the spiritual battle we are in and to persevere in the face of it. First, as we focused on in the last message (Discovery Paper 4859), we have the word of God for our spiritual strength and direction, for our basic spiritual nourishment and sustenance, and as our tool for ministry to reach out to people. So we need to continue to be in the word of God.

Second, we have prayer. This whole book is laced with references to Paul's prayer life for these people. He gives thanks for them in prayer. He prays that he can come to them. (If you want to do a great study of spiritual mentoring, take the letters of Paul and locate the verses where he is praying for people. Some of the most powerful words of what it means to be a loving fellow Christian and mentor to others are contained in Paul's prayers.) At the core he was a man of prayer, and we too have to be men and women who prepare ourselves for battle through prayer.

Third, we have relationships. Paul was in the battle with his colleagues as he traveled around. He had relationships with various people, and he kept praying for time to be with them. He understood that one of the great gifts of God in the battle is each other.

Perhaps you saw the movie *Gladiator*. In one dramatic scene a little band of gladiators is in the arena, woefully under-manned and under-armed, and Maximus gets them all together in a circle in the middle and says, "Whatever comes out of these gates, we've got a better chance of survival if we work together." They organize themselves and are able to conquer superior foes with superior weaponry, because of their cohesiveness as a unit. It's a wonderful scene.

Who are the people in your life with whom you have significant relationships that provide encouragement, spiritual sustenance, and enjoyment as you go into the battle day by day? If you can't name the people who pray with you and for you, who keep you accountable, with whom you share your life, with whom you minister, you are ill-prepared for the battle.

All three of these aspects are essential for us to be properly prepared to go to war in this spiritual battle that God calls us to live in every day. We need to be men and women of the word, men and women of prayer, and men and women of significant, strong relationships of encouragement and fighting together. This is what it takes to be a persevering church in the face of all of these obstacles.

This section closes with one of the prayers of Paul in 3:11-13:

Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

There are three things Paul draws our attention to in this prayer. The first is strong relationships: "May our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you." The second is ever-growing love for all people: "May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people everywhere." The third is steadfastness of faith: "So that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness...at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

I encourage you to take a little time and pray these things for yourself and others whom God puts on

your heart.

NOTES:

(1) “Standouts in a Hall of Infamy: The Top Three Countries Where Persecution is Greatest Today,” June 2003 issue, Vol. 2, Number 5 of *Frontline Faith*, the newsletter of Open Doors, Santa Ana, CA. P. 1-2.

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1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13
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[Back to Index page](#)

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