

“Gospelizing” the Faithfulness of Christ

Among the Gentiles:

A Study of the Letters to the Galatians and Thessalonians

Diocese of West Texas

Spring & Fall 2010

Study and Reflection Session 9:

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Being “Gospeled” by the Faithfulness of Others

A Translation for Study, with Commentary

Translation of 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

3:1 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker with God in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith [*pistis*], 3 so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were destined to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know. 5 For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent [Timothy] to know your faith [*pistis*]; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain.

Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Being a “co-worker with God in the gospel of Christ.” For Paul, ministry is a jointly divine and human effort. God works to bring life

to the world through *all* people who are partners in the ministries of Jesus Christ (see also 1 Cor 1:9; 12:4-7).

Through experience, Paul knows Christians are destined to suffer persecution. As noted in the Introduction, the refusal of Christians to participate in the Greco-Roman cults would make them appear both unpatriotic and atheistic to their neighbors, resulting in persecution and suffering. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he prepared them in advance for this present experience of persecution and suffering.

How can one's "faith" be "shaken" or "strengthened"? In the first century of the Common Era, the Greek word *pistis* (usually translated "faith" or "faithfulness") was a word associated with Greek rhetoric.

- To have "faith" meant that you were *persuaded* by rhetorical arguments that something was true or trustworthy.
- Thus, *pistis* denoted the quality of having *confidence* (or, "believing) that something was true or trustworthy.
- Paul employs both aspects of *pistis* in his teaching and letters.
- To have "faith" meant being *persuaded* that God's life-giving power would be experienced through those who act "faithfully" – i.e. those who "stand firm in the Lord" (see 3:8) by walking in the ways of Jesus Christ.
- As Christians experienced God's life-giving power through those who were "faithful," they grew more and more *confident* that embodying Christ leads to new life – for them and others.
- Conversely, Paul knew that faith was not something to be taken for granted – it is always a work in progress; experiences of suffering and persecution might diminish people's sense of persuasion, shaking their confidence in living the life of Christ's "faithfulness" in the world.
- Paul's experience with the ebb and flow of "faith" led him to be anxious about the state of the "faith" of the Thessalonians.
- If the Thessalonians' "faith" has foundered, his time-consuming work in building up their "faith" will have been in vain.

- So, Paul sends Timothy to discover the present state of the Thessalonians' "faith" and "faithfulness" and to strengthen and encourage them by modeling both of these aspects of *pistis*.

According to Paul, their suffering and persecution is the work of the "tempter." From an apocalyptic perspective (see Study and Reflection Session 8), the "tempter" is Paul's personification of one of the destructive and chaotic powers at loose in the world that are working in opposition to the will of God.

Translation of 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

3:6 And now Timothy has just come to us from you, and has gospelsed [*euangelizomai*] to us about your faith [*pistis*] and love [*agapē*]. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us – just as we long to see you. 7 For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith [*pistis*]. 8 For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. 9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith [*pistis*].

Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

Paul's strange assertion that Timothy "gospelsed" Paul. This unusual language draws on Paul's understanding of "gospel" as an *experience* of God's life-giving power (See Study and Reflection Session 1 in connection with Galatians 1:1-10).

- The verb form of the noun "*euangelion*" ("gospel") – *euangelizomai* – is most often translated as "to bring good

news,” “to preach good news,” “to proclaim good news,” or “to announce good news.”

- In the Greco-Roman world, the verb *euangelizomai* was used to denote a report of good news from the battlefield.
- Paul uses the verb in a similar context here: Timothy’s report that the Thessalonians, in the face of persecution, were remaining steadfast in their “faith” and “faithfulness” was comparable to a report from the battlefield.
- For Paul, however, Timothy’s report was more than just good news from the battlefield – the *effect* of the report on Paul was an experience of the power of God that brought him fullness of life as his anxieties for the Thessalonians were released.

The steadfast “faith” of the Thessalonians brings life to Paul.

For Paul, ministry takes place for the benefit of others; so the “faith” and “faithfulness” of his congregation are integral to his fullness of life.

- Paul experiences new “life” as his anxiety subsides when Timothy tells him that all is well with the Thessalonians.
- Paul has his own experience of the life-giving power of God – his own event of “gospel” taking place – when he hears that the Thessalonians still “stand firm in the Lord” (3:8).
- To “stand firm in the Lord” means the Thessalonians remain persuaded and confident about the importance of embodying Jesus Christ in their own lives, despite the persecution and suffering it brings them.

Nevertheless, their confidence *might* need to be restored. Even though they still “stand firm in the Lord,” Paul wants to see the Thessalonians again to nurture and encourage them.

- Paul understood his missionary task as not just gaining converts, but exercising pastoral care over time (even from a distance) by strengthening the “faith” of those converted.

- Paul wants to see the Thessalonians again to persuade them further and to build up their confidence that their “faith” and “faithfulness” (*pistis*) continue to be God’s will for them.

Translation of 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

3:11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. 12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13 And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming [*en tē parousia*] of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

The Thessalonians are to practice their love generously toward everyone. Paul asks God to empower the Thessalonians to act the same loving way toward unbelievers with whom they are in daily contact (friends, family members, co-workers) as they act toward one another.

To “strengthen” one’s “heart” strengthens a person in every way. For first century Jews, the heart was the center of a person’s will, motives, and thoughts; hence, Paul prays for God’s thoroughgoing empowerment of the Thessalonians for their daily living.

- For Paul, people’s hearts are strengthened in “holiness” as part of the process of becoming “saints.”
- They continue over time to grasp at a deeper and deeper level what it means to follow Jesus in their daily lives.

Questions for Reflection

1. Can you describe an event in your own life when suffering (or persecution) *tested* your faith and faithfulness? Where, or from whom, did you find strength and encouragement so that your faith and faithfulness were not shaken?
2. Can you describe a time when you were anxious about whether the suffering (or persecution) of a loved one was testing their faith and faithfulness? What actions did you take to strengthen and encourage your loved one's faith and faithfulness?
3. In 3:10 Paul says he prays night and day that he might be with the Thessalonians to "restore whatever is lacking in your faith." Can you tell a story about a time in your own life of faith when your confidence in the gospel *was shaken*? Who helped "restore" what was lacking in your confidence and how did that restoration take place?
4. Timothy "gospelled" Paul by telling him that the Thessalonians were "standing firm in the faith" and this brought fullness of life to Paul and relief from his anxiety. What does this tell us about Paul's relationship with the members of his churches? Whose well-being is this important to you? Is faith a part of your relationship with this person? In what ways?
5. Can you describe concretely the ways the "faith" and "faithfulness" of others are integral to your own life of "faith"?
6. Paul tells the Thessalonians they are to practice their love not only among the members of the church, but to everyone throughout the course of their daily lives. What spiritual habits,

disciplines, or practices do you follow to ensure that you live your daily life in “faith” and “faithfulness”?

7. Traditionally, holiness refers to setting something apart for a special use. There is a certain tension between leading a life that is set apart for God’s uses, while also practicing love of all. How do you strengthen your heart in holiness? How do you strengthen your heart to practice love toward everyone?