

# WEDNESDAY

## Bible Study

### **The Marks Of A Model Church**

‘Helping Others To Stand’ - 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

16 October 2024 - Revd Paul A. Carr

**Introduction** During this series we’ve been looking at Paul’s model for nurturing/ establishing new believers into an effective Christian community. Paul saw himself as a spiritual parent to the Thessalonian church. His ministry had enabled the church to be born and nurtured and now he wanted them to learn to stand – but how would he be able to do that from a distance? In these 13 verses from chapter 3, we see what Paul initiated to enable these new Christians to stand firm. Three points:

**1. Paul Sent Them A Helper vs 1–5** When Paul and his friends left Thessalonica, they went to Berea and, as you might expect, preached the Word of God. However, those who were causing them problems in Thessalonica followed them and stirred up more opposition. So, Paul left for Athens while Silas and Timothy remained at Berea (Acts 17:10-15). It seems as though Timothy joined Paul in Athens (note the *we* in vs1-2) but Paul sent him back to Thessalonica to help steer the young church through some difficult times. I think there were three motivating factors behind Paul’s decision.

**Paul’s concern, vs1.** Paul was a pastor as well as an evangelist. He knew that evangelism was only a part of the ministry God had commissioned him to do. It was because of his love that he couldn’t leave the Thessalonians when they needed spiritual help the most. The word *left* in vs1 actually means to: *leave loved ones at death*. In 2:17-20 we saw Paul expressing his great love for his friends in Thessalonica and we know he’d been forced to leave because of persecution and, though he wanted to return was hindered in doing so. Paul wasn’t a ‘charlatan shepherd’ who abandoned his sheep when they were in danger John 10:12-13. Paul said he felt ‘orphaned’ from them. The Greek word can also mean ‘bereaved.’ So, leaving those new believers was like a bereavement to Paul. Have you ever experienced something like that? Paul loved the Thessalonian church, and he would have risked his own life to return to them. He wanted to give of himself to them, as a parent provides for their children’s every need. Paul knew they needed to be taught and nurtured, or their faith would die, so he sent Timothy to *establish* them in the faith.

**Timothy’s character, vs2.** Not every believer is equipped to nurture the faith of other Christians. We all have different gifts and talents that we can use for the Lord. However, I believe that every ‘mature’ Christian should be able to nurture younger Christians to grow in the Lord and to learn to stand on their own two feet. Unfortunately, some Christians are like those described in Hebrews 5:11-14. They have gone backward in their spiritual walk and have forgotten the basic truths of the Word. Instead of teaching others, they themselves need to be taught again.

Timothy, along with Titus, were Paul’s ‘special agents’ whom he used as trouble-shooters whenever the churches he established had problems. Paul sent Timothy to Corinth to help straighten out problems there (1 Corinthians 16:10-11). He also planned to send Timothy to help the saints in Philippi (Philippians 2:19-23). What kind of a person can help younger believers grow in the Lord? To begin with, they must be a Christian themselves.

We cannot lead others where we have not been ourselves and we can't share with others what is not taking place in our own hearts and lives. Paul was a 'spiritual father' to Timothy having led him to faith in Jesus (1 Timothy 1:2) so he knew something of his faith and his heart to serve the Lord. Timothy wasn't afraid of hard work. He had faithfully served with Paul (Philippians 2:22) and knew how to minister in the churches. We all know how demanding it is to raise children and it is no less demanding to establish new Christians. They have many problems and often do not grow as fast as we think they should. Nurturing them requires love and patience, and Timothy had these qualities. Timothy was a team player and saw himself as a co-worker with the Lord and with the other believers. Timothy submitted to Paul's leadership and left for Thessalonica and returned to Paul in Corinth with news about the church. No wonder Paul wrote of him: *I have no-one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare.* Philippians 2:20.

***The church's conflict, vs 3-5.*** The trials and tribulations that come our way are not accidents but a normal part of the Christian life. This was something Paul repeatedly told them, and, in the same way, we must warn new believers that the Christian life isn't easy as we seek to live for Jesus, otherwise, when trials and difficulties come, these babes in Jesus will be discouraged and defeated. Of course, it is Satan who is behind these persecutions - the enemy of the Christian. He is the tempter, vs5, who he seeks to ruin our faith. When Satan tempted Eve, he began by weakening her faith in God, Genesis 3:1: *Has God really said ...* He will use any means to attack the Christian and weaken their faith in God. It is our faith he will always attack first. 1 Peter 5:8-9: *Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him (how?) By standing firm in the faith ...*

Satan often flatters the believer in order to lead him astray. Satan told Eve she would be like God if she ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and she fell for his flattery. Satan is more dangerous when he flatters than when he frowns. Timothy's task was to establish these believers and encourage (comfort) them in their faith. It is faith in God that keeps our feet on the ground when the enemy attacks. Without faith in God, we are defeated: *This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith,* 1 John 5:4.

**2. Paul Wrote Them A Letter vs 6-8** Timothy met Paul at Corinth (Acts 18:5) and gave him the news that things were going well at Thessalonica. He reported that the new believers were standing firm in spite of persecution. The phrase, vs6: *brought good news* is the same as 'preaching the Good News of the Gospel.'

Paul's response was to encourage them in writing them this letter. A letter to establish the doctrine and faith and truth of a church - but that is what he did, and it did! In a similar way, how many of us have felt encouraged when we've received a letter or a phone call or an e-mail from someone telling us they are thinking of us and praying for us? Sometimes, however, the written word seems to have much impact than a few words down the phone, don't they? Why's that? Maybe it has to do with the fact that people, usually, take great care in what they are writing, and it is something that can be read time and time again.

Paul was an avid writer of letters; most of the NT is made up from the letters he wrote, though there are many others which are not part of the NT (1 Corinthians 5:9). However, the two letters to the Thessalonian church are an established part of God's inspired Word. And, as we've looked at in recent weeks, it is God's Word that is one of the best tools for establishing new Christians in the faith. Whilst I don't want to repeat what I've said in recent weeks I want to reaffirm the importance of what I've said. When I first became a Christian, churches didn't have regular follow up courses such as Alpha or a beginner's house groups, like we have today. My initiation, as it were, was to become involved in a very serious Bible study and it's something I've never regretted and, I'm sure, has established my appreciation of, and my love for, God's Word.

**3. Paul Prayed For Them vs 9-13** The word of God and prayer should go together. The prophet Samuel told the people of Israel: *... far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right,* 1 Samuel 12:23.

In Acts 6:4, Peter said: *We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.* Some people reject intercessory prayer, as a fatalistic exercise, but each of us play our part in God working his purposes out in our world today. In prayer: We can travel to any part of the world; we can stand alongside anyone we choose; we can pray about any individual; we can enter into any situation. D.L. Moody: *The Christian on his knees sees more than the philosopher on tiptoe.*

Yes, God does have all things in control, he is sovereign, but when we pray, we find ourselves listening to God to see what his next move is for us, not us influencing His strategy. Leonard Ravenhill wrote: *Prayer is not an argument with God to persuade him to move things our way, but an exercise by which we are enabled by his Spirit to move ourselves his way.* I've often thought that: *Prayer doesn't change God's mind but opens his hand.*

Intercessory prayer is a very powerful weapon but is so under used by Christians, simply because of the cost involved. The cost of time; loneliness; energy; and obedience. Prayer must at the very centre of our Christian existence and at the centre of all our efforts and plans. Remember the old saying: *Seven days without prayer makes one weak!*

I firmly believe there are two issues that face us as a church as we look to the future. One is the need to take God's word seriously and second is the need to immerse ourselves in more active corporate prayer life. Prayer must be our top priority if we want to move **closer** to God, move **where** God wants to lead us, move **how** God wants to lead us and move in the **power of His spirit**.

Jesus prayed for His disciples, just as Paul prayed for the Thessalonian Christians, that their faith would not fail (Luke 22:31-32). God can only respond when we share with him, intimately and honestly, what is on our hearts, and we are to: *pray without ceasing.* (1Thessalonians 5:17.) How many times have we heard/said: *The least I can do is pray.* The least? It's the most. James 5:16 reminds us: *The prayer of a righteous man/woman is powerful and effective.* We must never underestimate the importance of prayer in praying for young Christians. It is not enough to teach them Christian truths, we must also support them in our prayers. This is what Paul did and he prayed for three specific things:

***The maturity of their faith, vs10.*** Paul longed to see them again; he longed to minister to them and help bring their faith to maturity. But he couldn't support them in the way that he wanted and so he prayed: *night and day.* He prayed that they might grow in their faith, and God answered his prayer. Paul's prayer was answered because he wrote in his second letter: *your faith is growing more and more.* (2 Thessalonians 1:3).

***The increase of their love, vs12.*** Times of suffering can be times of selfishness. Some people react by building walls around them and shut themselves off. Others build bridges and draw closer to the Lord and His people. This was Paul's prayer for these believers, and God answered it: *... the love every one of you has for each other is increasing,* 2 Thessalonians 1:3. Our growing faith in God ought to result in a growing love for others. 4:9 tells us that we have been taught by God to love one another. The Bible teaches this time and time again. (1 John 3:11-24; 1 John 4:7-21).

Some of the best lessons are learned in the school of 'hard knocks.' Joseph suffered for thirteen years because of the envy of his brothers. Yet he learned to love them in spite of their hatred. The Jewish legalists persecuted Paul from city to city, yet Paul so loved his people that he would have willingly died for them (Romans 9:1-2). True love deepens in times of difficulty. Or at least it should.

The 'overflowing' love that Paul is writing about must be free to touch everyone. *We love because he first loved us,* 1 John 4:19. Now that isn't easy, is it? It's easy to love those whom we like but it's not easy to love those whom we don't know or who have done us a bad turn. True Christian love is shown, not only to believers – sometimes the church can't even do that - but to everyone. We love one another but we must also love the lost and our enemies. We are to fulfil the greatest commandment from which everything else will flow:

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your mind. The second is this, 'love your neighbour as yourself. Matthew 22:37-39.*

**The strengthening of their holiness, vs13.** Paul ended ch2 with a reference to the place of the saints at the return of Jesus and this chapter ends in the same way. Again, it is the return of Jesus that motivates the believer to live a holy life. It's a common theme of Paul's in this letter. Paul suggests that it is Jesus' return which is the source of stability in the Christian life. Where there is stability there is assurance and holiness. The two go together.

**Conclusion** In our desire to nurture new believers in the Christian faith, we are to have a concern for their well-being. We are to make the effort to get alongside them and encourage them as much as we can. We should take the time to write a letter, make a phone call, send an e-mail, make a personal visit! Most importantly, we are to pray for them that: their faith will mature; their love grow; and their character and conduct be holy and blameless before God. Ultimately, it's about the strong helping the weak, isn't it?

In Luke 12:48, Jesus said: ... *From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1: *To see people come to faith in Jesus is what made Paul's life worth living, he loved them dearly. How do we find that same love and concern for people that Paul so clearly had and for people that he had only spent weeks with?*

2. *Paul was afraid the trials would push the Thessalonians off track. How do you respond when severe trials come your way?*

3: *Paul prays night and day for the new believers. Do we pray 'earnestly' for people to come to know Jesus? Do we pray, as Paul prays, confidently, spontaneously, continuously?*

4. *In what ways does Paul's prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 show his passion for the church in Thessalonica?*