

1st THESSALONIANS

2:13 – 3:13

Introduction

The *Twilight Zone* used to freak me out! Not the show itself, but my feeling that, at any moment, I could without warning **enter** the Twilight Zone – “Another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound, but of mind, a journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination. That’s the signpost up ahead: Your next stop: *The Twilight Zone*.”

I hate to admit it... ***But I sometimes get a similar feeling as a Christian.*** It's not the Twilight Zone I'm concerned about; it's the *Trial Zone!* It's that strange dimension you enter without warning in which your world turns upside down with difficulties and dilemmas, troubles and tragedies, problems and pain. That's the signpost up ahead – and it says "suffering."

The text we read this morning would be a great monologue to describe the Trial Zone. Paul used several words to describe what you can expect as a Christian in this world:

1. In verse fourteen of chapter two, "suffered" is the same word the writers of the Gospels use to describe the sufferings of Jesus.
2. In verse fifteen, "persecuted" is a word that means *driven out and rejected*. "Contrary" is used to describe winds that blow against a ship to hinder its progress.
3. In verse eighteen, "hindered" describes a road broken up before you, rendering it impassable.
4. In verse three of chapter three, "afflictions" is *pressure from circumstances*.

You're going to enter this zone a lot! Rather than thinking it is strange, however, you're told (in 3:3),

1 Thessalonians 3:3 that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are **appointed** to this.

Your trials are divinely designed **appointments with afflictions**. You should not "be shaken" by them. These verses tell you how instead of being *shaken* you can remain *steady*.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Receive Aid In Appointments With Afflictions, and #2 You Render Aid In Appointments With Afflictions.

#1 You Receive Aid In
Appointments With Afflictions
(2:13-20)

One of the first things the apostle Paul explained to new believers was that "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). We should follow his example and let people know that the Christian life involves not just the usual suffering everyone on earth is subject to, but special times of trial on account of our faith in Jesus Christ. You have divine appointments with afflictions and God sees to it that you keep them.

How can you avoid being shaken and remain steady? You receive aid in your afflictions – spiritual aid from at least three sources: the *empowering* of the *Scriptures*, the *example* of the *saints*, and the *expectation* of the *Savior*.

You have the empowering of the Scriptures as an aid:

1 Thessalonians 2:13 For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed *it* not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.

The Thessalonians both "received" and "welcomed" God's Word. "Received" means that they heard it preached. "Welcomed" means that they accepted it into their hearts. There was a transfer from the *hearing* to the *heart*.

Have you done that? Have you transferred God's Word from hearing to heart? You're told how in the last word of the verse: "believe."

1. Maybe you're not a Christian; you're hearing the Word – transfer it to your heart by believing it as the truth.

2. Maybe you are a Christian; you, too, are hearing God's Word and need to go on believing it.

If you believe then God's Word will "effectively work" in you. God's Word has within it the power to accomplish what it commands. Jesus once commanded a crippled man to stretch out his hand – the very thing the man could not do. He believed the Word of God and was empowered to do it and was made whole (Mark 3:1-5).

That crippled man is typical of your appointments with afflictions. They are designed to **stretch** you in ways you would not choose on your own. The Word of God has within it the empowering you need to remain steady rather than be shaken.

You have the example of the saints as an aid:

1 Thessalonians 2:14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they *did* from the Judeans,

1 Thessalonians 2:15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men,

1 Thessalonians 2:16 forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up *the measure of* their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost.

The "Judean" "countrymen" Paul referred to were the Jews. Most of the "persecution" that dogged Paul's missionary journeys came either directly or indirectly from the Jews. Sadly, the Jews had a long history of religious persecution: They had for centuries "killed... their own prophets" and had recently "killed... the Lord Jesus." Paul is not being anti-Semitic; he was not bigoted or prejudiced. This was a simple statement of the facts. When he said the Jews "killed... the Lord Jesus," it is not to exclude the Romans who put Him to death... Nor is it to exclude the entire human race who put Him to death and for whom He died on the Cross. The testimony of the Bible is that we are **all** "Christ-killers."

Paul said the Jews were filling up "the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost." There is a lot of end-times prophecy in this statement! Having rejected Jesus as their promised Messiah, God temporarily set-aside the nation of Israel for discipline. Their discipline included the destruction of their Temple and Jerusalem in 70AD; it continues today; it will culminate in the

future seven-year Tribulation on the earth. When Jesus returns to earth at the end of the Tribulation, "all Israel will be saved" as they "look upon Him Whom they pierced" and accept Jesus as their Messiah.

In the mean time: Jews who became Christians were persecuted by "their own countrymen," their fellow Jews. Most of the believers in Thessalonica were Gentiles and they were being persecuted by their own countrymen, fellow Gentiles. The point of all this is that the Thessalonians were "imitators" of the example of saints before them – the example of keeping appointments with afflictions by suffering persecution for the sake of the Gospel.

It may sound weird but believers are to rejoice when persecuted because they are being treated just like the saints that preceded them and just like their Lord, Jesus Christ. At one point in the Book of Acts, after having been beaten and warned never to speak again about Jesus, the disciples are described as "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41).

Your appointments with afflictions – especially persecutions because you are a believer – put you in the best company, among the greatest people the world has ever seen. They are described in the Book of Hebrews by saying "of whom the world was not worthy (Hebrews 11:38).

You have the expectation of the Savior as an aid:

1 Thessalonians 2:17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire.

1 Thessalonians 2:18 Therefore we wanted to come to you - even I, Paul, time and again - but Satan hindered us.

1 Thessalonians 2:19 For what *is* our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? *Is it* not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?

1 Thessalonians 2:20 For you are our glory and joy.

Whoa! "Satan hindered us." I thought God was more powerful than the devil?

He is. He is so powerful, in fact, that He can even use Satan to accomplish His purposes on earth and in your life. "Hindered" means *to break up* or *to cut-in*. You hinder the progress of an army by

breaking-up the road ahead of them; you hinder the pace of a runner by cutting-in front of him. Paul had a sense that some of his appointed afflictions were satanic interference... But it didn't overly concern him because he knew God was allowing it to accomplish eternal purposes.

Some of your afflictions are satanic. **It should not overly concern you!**

The Thessalonians were aided in their afflictions by the expectation of seeing their Savior. The "presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming" is a reference to the Rapture of the Church. The believers of the Church Age will be caught-up to heaven – resurrected if dead, Raptured if still alive; then rewarded by Jesus and reunited with their believing loved ones. It will be a scene of incredible rejoicing.

Sometimes your appointments with afflictions are so severe that the expectation of seeing your Savior is all you have left. *It is enough!*

These verses in chapter two focus on the aid you receive in your appointments with afflictions. Chapter three has a different focus on the same theme:

#2 You Render Aid In
Appointments With Afflictions
(3:1-13)

Paul was forced out of Thessalonica after only three successive Sabbath-days of preaching the Gospel; after only about twenty-one days of teaching the new converts. He loved them and longed after them, but it was not God's will for him to be among them. God was allowing Satan to hinder Paul's return; God was allowing persecution to hit the young Church.

Paul could not personally return; but he could still render aid to them. He could do at least two things: He could talk to them about *perseverance* and he could talk to God about them in *prayer*.

You see him talking to them about perseverance in verses one through eight:

1 Thessalonians 3:1 Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone,

It was some months after his visit to Thessalonica – probably less than a year. Paul was in Greece with Timothy. He had an idea:

1 Thessalonians 3:2 and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith,

Paul sent Timothy to them. The purpose was to "establish and encourage" them in their "faith." They would be *encouraged* as Timothy *established* them.

"Encourage" might be translated "comfort" in your Bible. Comfort can be a sissy-word in our vocabulary. It was a strong word in the first century Christian vocabulary. It means *with-strength*. The idea is that you do and say what is necessary to persuade the person to persevere.

What Timothy did and said to comfort them is in verses three and four:

1 Thessalonians 3:3 That no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.

1 Thessalonians 3:4 For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.

Paul must have preached a series on suffering during the three weeks he was with them. Instead of thinking it strange and being shaken they should remain steady. Suffering is your destiny as a believer; you have divinely designed appointments with afflictions. You should persevere in them.

Christian do not always go through trials successfully:

1 Thessalonians 3:5 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.

The "tempter" is Satan, whom Paul already mentioned. He was being used by God so that the "faith" of these believers could be "known" by being shown as they endured persecutions. Paul was concerned that some of them might retreat under the pressure. They might be like the hearers in the Parable of the Sower who, when persecution came, would forsake the Gospel.

Wait a minute! I thought earlier (in chapter one) Paul said they were "the elect?" Sure he did – *and one way he knew it was that they endured suffering when they could have ended it by forsaking Jesus!*

He received a report from Timothy:

1 Thessalonians 3:6 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* -

1 Thessalonians 3:7 therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith.

1 Thessalonians 3:8 For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy had told them tough things during their initial visit. The believers appreciated them for it.

The missionaries were under attack; Satan was hindering them. Their converts were under attack; the tempter was persecuting them.

"For now we live" means they had received inspiration to press on in their own sufferings. It is implied that the young converts would also be inspired hearing of the perseverance of Paul and the other missionaries. It is characteristic of Christian suffering that we comfort one another by sharing God's faithfulness as we experience it.

"If you stand fast in the Lord" is another reminder that perseverance is necessary for suffering to have its effect upon you. You are able to stand fast because you are "in the Lord." But you must go on standing fast – persevering in your problems, pain, and persecutions.

Christians need to be told straight-out that they are appointed to suffer. Then they need to be encouraged to endure their sufferings, and even rejoice in them as they stand "in the Lord." This is how you render aid in appointments with afflictions.

You also render aid by talking to God in prayer:

1 Thessalonians 3:9 For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God,

1 Thessalonians 3:10 night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith?

Paul rejoiced in the report of their perseverance. Still, he wanted to visit them personally. He couldn't; but he could talk to God about them. He could – and did – pray. He prayed "night and day exceedingly" for them.

I'm sure he prayed for their suffering to be relieved; there's nothing wrong with that. He also prayed for what is recorded in the next verses. Since their sufferings were by divine appointment, then Paul wanted them to have an effect upon the believers. You see at least three effects in his prayers.

He prayed that suffering would perfect their faith:

1 Thessalonians 3:10 night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith?

1 Thessalonians 3:11 Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you.

"Perfect" means to *adjust* and *equip*. "Faith" here refers to their daily walk with Jesus. There are always going to be adjustments to better equip you for your walk on earth. Your goal is growth and maturity.

Paul may have prayed elsewhere for their sufferings to be relieved. He didn't do that here. He prayed that he might be able to go to them and point out how they could grow and mature through their suffering.

To render aid in appointments with afflictions you must desire the growth and maturity of your fellow believers.

He prayed that suffering would pour-out their love:

1 Thessalonians 3:12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we *do* to you,

Paul prayed that they might look past their suffering to "abound in love to" other believers and to "all" people everywhere. In other words, he prayed that their personal suffering would not become their focus.

Times of suffering can become times of selfishness. Your needs seem to outweigh the needs of others. Instead, let love for others pour-out from you and your own needs will be put into a better

perspective. John Bunyan wrote, "Afflictions make the heart more deep, more experimental, more knowing and profound, and so, more able to hold, to contain, and bear more."

He prayed that suffering would purify their hope:

1 Thessalonians 3:13 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.

Paul is referring to your life now as it will be reviewed in heaven at the Reward Seat of Jesus Christ. Suffering helps you to desire the end of your course on earth; it helps you to long for heaven and to see Jesus. The hope of His coming should exercise a purifying effect on your heart. You should desire to be "blameless in holiness" when you see Jesus.

God's pattern for life is that suffering must come before glory. When we suffer in the will of God, depending on His grace, and walking in faith, then suffering has a maturing and purifying effect on our lives.

Conclusion

We always ask "*Why?*" when suffering hits. It's only human. Better to acknowledge **Who** than to ask "*Why?*"

If you will acknowledge God is above your suffering, allowing it for His eternal purposes, then two things will result: *intimacy with God* and *sufficiency from God*.

Intimacy means that your suffering can draw you closer to God than you've ever been before. Good times of prosperity don't drive you to your knees the way problems and pain can.

Sufficiency means God always gives you sufficient strength by His abundant grace to persevere in your suffering. Sufficient grace produces joy and puts God's power on display as a testimony to others.

