



Let's Get Ready to Rapture

First Thessalonians 3:1-5

"High Anxiety"

The apostle Paul, who tells us to be anxious for nothing, had a moment of high anxiety over the situation in Thessalonica.

Let me refresh your memory. Paul and his companions had come to Thessalonica and preached the Gospel. It seems they were only there for three weeks, maybe even less than that, before they were literally run out of town by hostile Jews. Those same Jews followed Paul to his next stop and hassled him there.

If these opponents of the Gospel were so committed to their cause that they followed Paul, what must they be doing back in Thessalonica to the brand-new, baby believers Paul had left behind?

It was this anxiety that caused Paul to say - not once but twice - "when I could no longer endure it" (v1&5). A few other Bible translations use the phrase, "I couldn't stand it any longer."

What was Paul so anxious about, exactly? Look at verse five: "lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain."

In the Parable of the Sower Jesus said,
Mat 13:19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside.

Mat 13:20 But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;

Mat 13:21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

Mat 13:22 Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.

Mat 13:23 But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."

Apparently there is a fierce struggle that occurs right at the time a person receives the Gospel. It's a critical time during which the devil goes all-out to keep you from becoming established in the Word.

Having been run out of Thessalonica, Paul wondered if there were "stony" Thessalonians... Or stumbled Thessalonians... Or selfish ones whose lusts were choking out the Word of God.

In the second half of the chapter we'll hear the good report from Timothy regarding the Thessalonian believers. They were hanging in there despite the devil's best efforts against them.

To counter the devil, Paul sent Timothy to "establish" and to "encourage."

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

"Therefore" picks up where Paul left off in chapter two where he had explained he wanted to return to them but was being hindered by the devil.

We don't know what was hindering him; whether it was some illness or injury or something else. For whatever reason, he could not return to them and it was causing him anxiety.

Would you feel comfortable, as a Christian, saying to the church, "I just couldn't take it anymore!" Probably not; you'd think it somewhat immature. If someone said it to you, you'd probably feel obligated to correct them.

For all his steely cold logic, Paul comes across as extremely emotional. He definitely wore his heart on his sleeve.

Paul was anxious for a good cause. He knew that the baby believers were coming under heavy fire and that their spiritual lives were hanging in the balance.

Paul couldn't go back to Thessalonica, but apparently Timothy could. It would mean leaving Paul alone in Athens.

That's a bigger deal than you might think:

- It could expose Paul to danger from criminal elements. A lone, older man was much easier to assault than if he had a younger companion.

- It certainly exposed Paul to danger from spiritual enemies. He would have much less accountability alone than with Timothy around.
- It could hinder the progress of the Gospel in Athens - only having one man to do all the work.

Paul weighed the risks and opted to sacrifice for the sake of the believers he'd left behind. It was a real, severe sacrifice.

1Th 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,

Silas was probably with Paul and Timothy in Athens but he would be sent on his own mission, back to Macedonia.

Timothy was "sent" speaks volumes about this young man's understanding that his life was no longer his but belonged to The Lord. He was ready to stay; he was ready to be sent. Wherever God could use him, he was ready.

Note the progression in Timothy's description: "brother... minister of God... our fellow laborer in the Gospel of Christ."

We could say Timothy was an ordinary Christian - a "brother" - who had found his gifting - "the minister of God" - and was in the specific assignment God had for him at that time - "fellow laborer": with Paul in spreading "the Gospel of Christ."

If you are a Christian, you should gain some understanding of how God has gifted you and be seeking Him for your specific assignments.

How do you discover gifting? In the Word and in the church.

- In the Word you see how God gifts men and women to serve Him.
- In the church you serve others and see how God uses you.

Timothy had two priorities: (1) to establish them concerning their faith, and (2) to encourage them concerning their faith.

"Establish" means *to support, to strengthen, to make firm*. We need to read verse three to understand what kind of establishing they needed.

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

The "tempter" (verse 5) was attempting to shake them through "afflictions." The Word had been sown and the devil was trying to stumble the young believers so that they would not endure.

One way Timothy was to "establish" them was to remind them of what they already knew - that Christians are "appointed to" afflictions.

Shaking reminds me of earthquakes. More so than here in Central California, growing up in Southern California you were always thinking about "the big one," the big earthquake that was coming. It was never a matter of if but when it would shake things up. We were taught to stand in a doorway as this was supposed to be the strongest place, the most reinforced, in the house.

Timothy was sent to the Thessalonians while they were being all shook up in a devilish earthquake to remind them to stand in the Doorway and they'd be safe!

Timothy was to "encourage" them. Your Bible might translate it "comfort," and that's correct, but not the way we understand it. "Comfort" is not a sissy word; it isn't coddling, giving a blanket, making someone feel all warm and fuzzy.

It's a strong word that means to suck it up and hold your position. Timothy encouraged them by reminding them what we read in verse four:

1Th 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.

This is a spiritual version of "I told you so!" Paul had not minced words when he shared the Gospel in Thessalonica. Before arriving there he had been falsely arrested, beaten, and incarcerated. He let them know that in the world they would have much tribulation - more than the average Joe or Jane because they would become targets of the devil and his demons.

My idea of real spiritual, Scriptural comforting is to remind you of what you already know, or should know, so you will be strengthened to endure tribulation rather than seek to escape it.

Comfort equips you for the battle. It sends you back to the front lines rather than issuing you a furlough.

Timothy was to "establish" and "encourage" them "concerning their faith" (v2). Faith in Jesus Christ had put them in harms way.

Until they heard about Jesus, they were no threat to the devil. They were taken captive by him to do his will.

By professing faith in Jesus, they had become enemy combatants. No faith; no worries. Faith in Jesus - warfare.

Paul believed their salvation hung in the balance:

1Th 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.

He wanted to "know [their] faith." It means he wanted confirmation they were standing strong in their faith in Jesus Christ. In terms of the Parable of the Sower, he wondered if the seed had fallen on stony ground and not taken root in them.

Paul chose to call the devil "the tempter." The only other place the devil is called "the tempter" is in Matthew's Gospel when he is tempting Jesus. The devil opposed Christ and he will oppose Christians.

Paul was thereby reminding the Thessalonians that they could and should expect satanic opposition and assault for being believers.

Knowing the fierceness of our enemy, and the fickleness of human nature, Paul's anxiety was reasonable. Some seed falls on stony ground and the devil's attacks reveal its shallowness. When folks are made to suffer for the Gospel, they can stumble and forsake it.

Hadn't Paul called them God's elect? Sure - but that was *after* Timothy returned with his report that they were, indeed, standing fast.

If you've been saved a while, the devil still utilizes tribulations against you. It's not to steal the seed as if you were never saved but it can cause you to withdraw, to take yourself out of the battle.

In Second Corinthians 4:1 & 16 you read,

2Co 4:1 Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart.

2Co 4:16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.

Inbetween Paul talks about being "hard pressed... perplexed... persecuted... struck down" and "being delivered to death." Those tribulations contribute to make you "lose heart," which is to grow discouraged to the point of withdrawing from the fight.

Hang in there! It's a war whose outcome is decided and you are on the winning side.

If you've been listening the past little while you might have noticed we've been talking about the devil and spiritual warfare quite a lot. Well, so has the apostle Paul. Satan has been a major character in both opening chapters.

He's a major character throughout the Bible - from the Garden of Eden all the way until he is thrown into the Lake of Fire in the Revelation.

I just read an interesting article, *Where is the Devil in Contemporary Christianity?* The author claims,

Most conservative Protestants will not openly or blatantly deny the non-symbolic existence of Satan or demons and, if pressed, will claim to believe in them as non-symbolic realities of some kind. But, in my experience, anyway, most such pastors and theologians do not really want to deal with them. They are left aside and rarely mentioned in sermons, Sunday School lessons, and Bible studies.

Paul considered the devil a very real and terrible opponent of the Gospel; so should we.

Don't allow him to stumble you, to make you lose heart. As Paul said in Second Corinthians 4:14, "He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you."