**Faith in Uncertain Times – Part 4**

**Do You Know? - 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13**

Crosspoint – Dave Spooner – Jan. 24th, 2021

**Intro:**

* Paul and his companions thanked God and rejoiced in knowing that those living in Thessalonica had strong faith and overflowing love. We are to thank God as well, that through the work and ministry of this church, the word of God is received, retained, and relied upon.
* Now in order for your faith to be strong and your love to be overflowing, especially in uncertain times, it is critical for you to know a few things that are found in our text this morning. So, let's discover them together as we read, starting in I Thess. 2:17-3:13. I am going to read it slowly in its entirety, primarily from the NLT with a few modified phrases.

**1 Thess 2:17-3:13**

**Dear brothers and sisters, after we were torn away from you for a little while (though our hearts never left you), we tried very hard to come back because of our intense longing to see you again. 18** **We wanted very much to come to you, and I, Paul, tried again and again, but Satan prevented us. 19 After all, what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting as we stand in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he returns? It is you! 20 Yes, you are our glory and joy.**

**3 Finally, when we could stand it no longer, we decided to stay alone in Athens, 2 and we sent Timothy to visit you. He is our brother and God's co-worker in proclaiming the Good News of Christ.** **We sent him to strengthen you, to encourage you in your faith, 3 and to keep you from being shaken by the troubles you were going through.** **But you know that we are destined for such troubles. 4 Even while we were with you, we warned you that troubles would soon come—and they did, as you well know. 5 That is why, when I could bear it no longer, I sent Timothy to find out whether your faith was still strong. I was afraid that the tempter had gotten the best of you and that our work had been useless.**

**6 But now Timothy has just returned, bringing us good news about your faith and love. He reports that you always remember our visit with joy and that you want to see us as much as we want to see you. 7 So we have been greatly encouraged in the midst of our troubles and suffering, dear brothers and sisters, because you have remained strong in your faith. 8 It gives us new life to know that you are standing firm in the Lord.**

**9 How we thank God for you! Because of you we have great joy as we enter God's presence. 10 Night and day we pray earnestly for you, asking God to let us see you again to fill the gaps in your faith.**

**11 May God our Father and our Lord Jesus bring us to you very soon. 12 And** **may the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow and overflow, just as our love for you overflows. 13** **May he, as a result, make your hearts strong, blameless, and holy as you stand before God our Father when our Lord Jesus comes again with all his holy people. Amen.**

* The message for this morning is centered around three questions: Do you know how loved you are? Do you know how vulnerable you are? Do you know what is most important?
* To answer these questions, I am going to point out and highlight a number of things from our text. First question, do you know how loved you are?

**Do you know how loved you are?**

* Paul and his companions, compelled by the glory and love of Christ, intentionally traveled to various places to communicate the gospel and establish the church (see PowerPoint Map). They are now writing back to the people in places they have gone before because of their love for them.
* Because of persecution in Thessalonica, they had to quickly leave that city. In verse 17, Paul explains that they were "**torn away from you**," like someone being forced to leave their family, and they reassured them even though there was physical distance from them, their hearts were still with them. They were not like traveling salesmen who are here today and gone tomorrow, and only with them to get what they really wanted. But they genuinely and deeply loved them.
* Paul's love for them and his longing to be with them was evidenced by his multiple attempts to return and reconnect with them (v. 17-18). He said that he tried "very hard" to be with them, but Satan prevented them from doing so (and we will get to that in a moment).
* Paul, in **verses 19-20,** calls the people in this church his "pride and joy," his "glory and his crown," and his hope is when he stands in the presence of Jesus when He returns that he will boast and talk about them. Hey, let me tell you about the time they banded their money together to send the pastor's son to school… Let me tell you about when they gather items and give them away… Let me tell you when they did a drive-by party for a guy that was wheelchair-bound and homebound… Let me tell you about two 70-year-old guys shoveling heavy snow… Let me tell you about this body of believers who sacrificed and gave of themselves to a bunch of kids… Let me tell you about them… and that is how I feel about you.
* And the hardest thing for me (as a pastor) and other spiritual leaders is the separation- not just of physical distance, but of viewpoints and politics and relationships . . . and the not knowing how people are doing with their faith. I don't know if they are drifting or if it is COVID. I don't know who all is in this building or who is online; I have not seen some people in almost a year, and some people I want to meet, but can't. It's hard to get people together to do much of anything… or what will happen or what we can do in the future.
* Paul felt this tension himself; the separation and not knowing was killing him, and **"when we could stand it no longer"** (1) they sacrificed the help of Timothy and sent him back to them to help them and bring back word as to what was happening. And when Timothy came back with a good report that they were standing strong in their faith and loving one another and that they longed to be reunited with them, Paul said that they were "greatly encouraged" and it gave them "new life" and "joy" (7 & 8). And they earnestly continued to pray for them with the hope of being reunited and to continue to build up their faith (9 & 10).
* One of the primary ways that God's love is shown to us is through our spiritual shepherds and in the community of faith of the church. It is important for you to know and experience this kind of love. It is important for us to express it and demonstrate this to one another.
* The next question I want to ask you is, do you know how vulnerable you are?

**Do you know how vulnerable you are?**

* *You are vulnerable to isolation.* Satan works to separate us from those who will help us in our faith. **We wanted very much to come to you, and I, Paul, tried again and again, but Satan prevented us (v. 18)**. Have you ever noticed how hard it is sometimes to connect? It seems uncanny how things come up right before church, or a Bible study or time with a strong person in the faith? All of a sudden, the car won't start, or you get sick, or the technology won't work, or you get in a fight with your spouse or kids? Sometimes it seems like everything is going against us when it comes to connecting with those who will help us in our faith.
* These obstacles are not just natural events. You also have an enemy that is working against you growing strong in your faith. I am not one that finds a devil behind every doorknob, however, I do not want you to be "**unaware of his schemes**" (2 Cor. 2:11), because he comes against you and is working to destroy you, and one of the ways he does so is separating you from those who will shepherd you in the faith.
* One of his most effective schemes is to divide and conquer—isolation, intimidation, and obliteration. You must fight to gather together; you must fight to connect with the community of faith. If the apostle Paul was vulnerable for this, so are you. And in his case, it was not a lack of motivation. It became an OTO an "opportunity to overcome," which proved how much he loved and how strong his desire was (it was overcome by training and sending Timothy). Satan himself works to separate you from those who will help you grow. I want you to know that you are vulnerable to this. Fight like your life depends upon it to connect with people that will help you be strong in your faith.
* *You are vulnerable in tribulation.* Tribulation and troubles can shake, discourage and weaken our faith. **We sent him to strengthen you, to encourage you in your faith, 3 and to keep you from being shaken by the troubles you were going through (v. 2-3).** Your loved one gets cancer; you lose your job; a relationship goes south, and instead of things coming together, they are falling apart. There is affliction, hardship, distress, and adversity. We can become weak, discouraged, and shaken in our faith because of these things.
* Our best defense is twofold. First, we must reach out to each other, especially during times like this, both from those who are in trouble and from those who know about the trouble. Second, is to expect and be prepared for this stuff to happen. Don't fall for the unbiblical and demonic theology (1 Tim. 4:2) that if you are a Christian and have faith that everything will go right for you, or that you will have no trouble or hardships or suffering because that is not the truth. Because of this, many people's faith becomes shipwrecked in troubled waters.
* This is why Paul taught them that troubles would come, **But you know that we are destined for such troubles. 4 Even while we were with you, we warned you that troubles would soon come—and they did, as you well know (v.3-4).** This was not "soft-serve" Christianity. By expecting them to come, you can be prepared for them to come. Steel your mind and develop a theology of suffering. Strengthen your resolve: As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Tie yourself into the family of faith (ill. of a blizzard). Keep moving forward and keep getting up. Your reward is waiting, and the King is worthy.
* *You are vulnerable to temptation.* **I was afraid that the tempter had gotten the best of you and that our work had been useless (v.5).** He has gotten the best of you because he wants the best of you. He wants you to serve him and his purpose versus growing in your faith, loving others, and serving God and His purposes. He captures you by luring you away from God and the gospel through temptation.

**James 1:14-15 ESV**

**But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.**

* The devil is a fisherman. And he will use any bait to get you hooked and pull you to him. (Ill. of fishing with the use of various "baits" that catch people.)
* The devil does not want the best for you; he wants the death of you.

**15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.**

* And he is not just talking for this life, but also for eternity. He plays for keeps. He will hook you, and then bind you, and shame you, which leads to more isolation, more tribulation, more temptation, and deeper and deeper you go. Free yourself by reconnecting to God, reconnecting to those who will help you grow in your faith, and reconnecting to those who will help you through tribulation and help you out of and to avoid temptation. Do this so that your faith will grow, and your love will overflow.

**Do you know what is most important?**

* I am going to give you the answer: **What is most important is the strength of your faith and the depth of your love.**
* This is what Paul was dying to know. Do they still have faith? Do they still have love? When he could not wait any longer to know, he sent Timothy to find out. And when he came back and reported the good news about their faith and love, he was overjoyed, giving thanks to God. Knowing this gave Paul new life and encouragement while he himself was going through distress and persecution. And then he earnestly and continually prayed to God that they would be reunited with the believers so he could continue to build up their faith and make it stronger (v. 5-10).
* And then he ends this section with this beautiful prayer. Notice what he does not pray for. He does not pray that they will be taken out of persecution. He does not pray that life will be great for them. He does not pray for healing, or riches, or power. Do you know what he prays for? He prays, "**may the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow and overflow"** (v. 12). *The result of a strong faith is overflowing love* (Ill. of glass and pitcher of water).
* Now check this out, then he goes on to say, "**May he, as a result, make your hearts strong, blameless, and holy as you stand before God our Father when our Lord Jesus comes again with all his holy people. Amen"** (v.13). A solid faith results in overflowing love, which results is a strong, blameless, and holy heart before God. If you want to holy before God, then ask Him to fill your heart with an overflowing love for one another and everyone else. That is the only way to be holy, the only way to be blameless, the only way to have a strong heart. And all of this starts with your faith in the only one who is perfectly holy because He lived in perfect love. Through our faith in Him, God makes us holy by pouring His love into our faith that overflows to others.
* So my prayer and my question before God is, "How can we make our faith stronger, and how can we best love one another and the rest of the world?" The only way that they will know that we are disciples of Jesus is if we love one another (John 13:35). Not by our politics or our protests or our church attendance or our scripture memorization, but how we love one another. Focus on what is most important, that your faith will be solid, and your love will be overflowing. Watch out for the working of the devil. Connect yourself to the community of faith and those who can build your faith. Love one another deeply, from the heart.
* Conclude with prayer.