

FACING THE HARD TIMES TOGETHER

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

[Main idea: The church is God's instrument to overcome Satan's attempt to destroy our faith in tough times.]

We can't even imagine what it would be like!

You're still in your teens.

You've only been married a short time.

You just had your first child.

Suddenly, your town is invaded by armed men; you're forced to leave your home in the middle of the night, and barely escape with your life.

All because you've trusted Christ and are known as a Christian.

You spend next 4 yrs in a refugee camp, with scarcely enough food to survive.

Then you're taken to a foreign country, many miles from home, where you spend next 15 yrs in a strange culture, where people speak a different language and live a different lifestyle.

All because you dared to follow Christ! *We can't even imagine!*

How do WE handle the "hard times" of our lives?

We're so used to the easy life, that we've lost sight of the struggles our brothers and sisters faced during 1st century—that many face today.

We don't realize how much **Scripture** was written to encourage God's people in times of **persecution**.

Much of N.T. **written to help us face tough times—esp. times of persecu-tion:** Heb, James, 1 & 2 Pet, Rev, 1 & 2 Thess, even Phil (the JOY book!).

When Bible students today look at these books, we view them through lens of the ivory tower. Because WE *live* in an ivory tower!

We focus on our issues (theoretical doctrinal issues),
rather than on their issues (practical issues of survival in suffering).

So we miss the point!

Our Sudanese brothers and sisters understand these books better than we do.

They and their families have lived through similar hard times. ***They get it!***

[During revolution, teaching James in Guate. "*How did you know?*"]

While we can't comprehend what that kind of suffering would be like,
we **DO** face our own brand of "tough" times.

When life doesn't go the way we expect.

We lose our job.

We lose our family, or a family member.

Our house is "underwater;" we don't have funds to pay the mortgage.

We, or someone we love, is diagnosed with terminal cancer.

How do WE respond to the hard times WE face?

Paul writes 1 Thess to church struggling in hard times, suffering for their faith.

Thessalonians get the point. It's daily life for them!

Thessalonian church—one of 1st churches in Macedonia,
started during Paul's 2nd journey. => Acts 16-17

Ministry is fruitful. People respond positively.

Jewish opposition and persecution arises, continues after Paul's departure.

Testimony of their **transformed lives leads to persecution.**

Result of their suffering

They feel alone and discouraged. *Why doesn't God DO something?!!*

They're questioning: "Why hasn't Paul come back to help us?"

"He must not *care* about us and what we're going through."

"Maybe he's afraid—he's trying to protect himself."

Purpose for writing

Paul writes to assure them of his love for them.

He wants them to understand what the real issues are.

[1st 3 chapters: ▼]

PAUL REMINDS THEM OF HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM 1-3

He responds to their doubt about whether he really cares.

Ch. 1 HE GIVES THANKS FOR THEIR RESPONSE TO GOSPEL

Reminds them of their initial response, when he first visits them.

His thanksgiving 1:2 *"We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers."*

Their response to the Gospel 1:3 *"remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love, and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."*

He's thankful: *when gospel's preached, they accept it.*

Evidence of their election 1:4-10 *"For we know, brothers loved by God, that **he has chosen you**, 5 because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.... 6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord; for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers*

Their changed lives are testimony to the effect of gospel.

Everyone's talking about it.

They turn from pagan idolatry to worship the One True God, to serve Him, and to wait for the return of His Son.

Even in the midst of great affliction, they have joy. **1:6** *"You received the Word **in much affliction, with joy** from the Holy Spirit."*

It's obvious this comes from the Holy Spirit's work in them.

They are an example to everyone else.

Ch. 2 EVIDENCE OF PAUL'S CONCERN FOR THEM

He reminds them of HIS attitude in his **initial visit**.

He shows his concern by the way he serves them.

His pure motives 2:1-6

He demonstrates pure motives by his concern for them then.

He's faithful in spite of suffering 2:1-2

2:2 *For though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the Gospel of God in the midst of much conflict."*

**When preaching leads to suffering,
he doesn't try to escape it.**

If he were afraid, he never would have started to minister among them;
he'd have run away at the first whiff of persecution!

It's no fun to suffer for Jesus!

His concern is for God's approval, not man's. 3-4

He's sincere, not using flattery, nor seeking praise. 5-6

His pure methods 2:7-9 In his methods he was also blameless.

Demonstration of love 2:6b-7 *"like a mother cares for her children."*

—gentle display of love and concern.

Sacrificial service 2:8-9 *"we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well,..."* —selfless, sacrificial service.

His pure life 2:10-12 *"You are witnesses, and God also, how holy, righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. ¹¹For you know how, like a father with his children, ¹²we exhorted each of you and encouraged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory."*

He's careful to model spotless Christian conduct.

2:7 Like a mother, he shows gentle love.

2:11 Like a father, he shows concern for their welfare
to guide them in a path worthy of God.

THEIR RESPONSE TO PAUL'S MINISTRY 2:13-16

As a result, they're convinced by observing his conduct and attitude;

They accept his message and follow the example of the church in Judea, of Christ, the prophets, and Paul himself, **suffering for the gospel.**

Their response to him is evidence of his **persuasive integrity.**

ANSWER TO THEIR QUESTION ABOUT PAUL'S ABSENCE 2:17-20

After **reminding** them of **previous evidence** of his concern for them,

Paul explains **the reason he hasn't come to visit them now.**

He **wants to come** and **has kept trying to come. 2:17** *"But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face."*

Departure wasn't his choice. They were "torn away."

Separation was forced on him by circumstances beyond his control

Lit., => he was "orphaned"—taken away from his family, overnight.

Acts 17: God protected him from a mob attack.

The brothers led him out of town in the middle of the night.
Physical separation didn't separate them from his heart!

They're "*out of sight, [but not] out of mind!*"

He always considered it a *temporary* separation.

He kept trying to go back. **2:17b-18a** "*We endeavored the more eagerly, with great desire to see you face to face, 18 because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again.*"

Paul knows that going back means persecution, yet he keeps trying.

These words are packed with emotion—he feels deep desire to be together.

So what happened to *HIS* plan? There's opposition—an obstacle in the way.

Notice who wants to keep them apart!

[Prevention by Satan] **2:18b** "*—but Satan hindered us*"—he blocks the way.

We don't know HOW, but Paul knows WHO!

Paul's continuing concern for them. Why does he care so much? **2:19-20** "*For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 For YOU are our glory and joy.*"

We have a vested interest in you. Why?

When the Lord comes and we appear before Him,

What do you think will be our greatest joy?

What will we be most excited about?

What's the greatest blessing we could receive when the Lord comes?

"What do you think we'll brag about—present as a crown at His feet?"

YOU will be our glory, our joy, our crown to boast over!

There's no way we'd just leave you hanging, to struggle alone!

We have every reason to genuinely care about you!

When I read this passage, I'm reminded of **our relationship with EFC.**

A lot of you weren't here yet when we left 15 years ago.

When we look back on our years of ministry, what we glory in, what we get excited about isn't the building. It's YOU—the people of EFC!

We don't get excited about what WE did.

We get excited about what God has done in your lives.

YOU are our glory, our joy, our crown of boasting.

Can you believe what GOD has done?!!

God gave US privilege of participating in what HE's doing in YOUR lives!

When Christ appears, we'll be excited about what He's done in YOU.

TEMPORARY SOLUTION TO CONCERN: TIMOTHY'S VISIT

3:1-10

*3 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone,² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, **to establish** and **exhort you** in your faith,³ **that no one be moved [shaken] by these afflictions**. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you, beforehand: "we're about to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and as you know."⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.*

*6 But now Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us **good news** of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— 7 for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. 8 For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. [this is living: to see you stand fast in the Lord!] 9 For what thanksgiving can we return [pay back] to God for you, for all the joy that we feel on account of you before our God, 10 as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is [still] lacking in your faith?"*

Several weeks ago someone raised the issue of how we should pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters—for the church in Sudan.

Here's a good model to follow.

Pray through expression of concern *Paul* raises for persecuted church.

Pray that God will produce the things Paul celebrates here.

Paul knows they won't be satisfied with a substitute, yet he sends Timothy in his place to encourage them.

They are shaken by their suffering.

Like us, when tough times come, they question:

Where did we go wrong? Are we outside God's will?

Have we done something wrong?

Has God abandoned us?

They need someone with spiritual maturity to come alongside and encourage them. To bring stability in the storm.

They're new believers, not yet grounded in their faith.

No one's there to instruct and encourage them.

Satan is out to get them. They're at risk.

He reminds them that he kept telling them beforehand: persecution is coming. **This is no surprise. (3:4)**

Jesus told His followers: "In this world you WILL have trouble."
(Jn 16:22)

Paul even **had to remind Timothy**, years later: *those who seek to live Godly lives WILL suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12).*

Don't let it shake you!

Paul isn't talking about a *period* of persecution the church will pass through, then go back to *normal* life.

Normal life for God's people IS persecution.

Sometimes the church doesn't suffer much, because we don't raise our godly profile enough. The devil and the world WILL try to knock God's people down when we take a stand for Him.

To the extent that our godly values conflict with our culture, we can expect to suffer for our faith.

Today we're in greater danger of being *seduced* by our culture than of being *persecuted* by it!

We must guard against the risk of being *absorbed into* our culture.

Our values ought to conflict with those of the world around us.

To the extent they do, we can expect to suffer for our faith.

Like all persecution writers, Paul is concerned about ***their faith***.
(3:5)

The faith he desires is a ***daily commitment to trust God***, no matter what happens to us.

Are we trusting God in the dark? Are we clinging to Him?

He isn't afraid they might lose their salvation.

That can't happen to them. Remember **1:4**?

*"Your transformed life demonstrates that **God has chosen you.**"*

It /S possible tough times might cause us to doubt—to lose perspective, to wonder if we can *trust God today*, in *these* trying times!

Natural temptation in persecution: to seek escape from the pressure, to back off from a *visible* commitment to Christ.

If we throw in the towel and give up, Satan wins.

(Remember how Satan tried to defeat Job?)

We've watched it many times, as believers suffer final stages of fatal illness.

Two people, same church, same Savior—no doubt of that.

Yet their faith in the face of pain and death may be very different.

One may be bitter because of the pain—struggling to the end.

He's not enjoying God's rest and peace.

Another at peace, because he knows he can trust God in the dark.

He rests in God because he knows he can trust Him.

He knows we follow a GOOD God, who still has a wonderful plan.

He looks forward to what comes next in God's plan.

Hospital personnel observe, they can't understand that faith.

God is glorified; Satan is defeated; those who trust Him rest.

The same is true of God's people in persecution.

Some may be struggling; Others enjoy God's peace.

Paul wants us to come alongside, encourage each other to trust God, to rest in Him.

Timothy's visit provides a *temporary* solution for their problem.

He comes alongside of them, encourages them.

Paul is also encouraged, by the positive report Timothy brings back.

Timothy brings "*good news*"!

He's glad to hear that even in great affliction, they're standing firm in faith. They're trusting God in the dark—even when they can't understand what's happening and they don't know what tomorrow holds.

They aren't throwing in the towel.

They aren't walking away, out of desire for self-preservation.

That motivates him to thank God for them, and to continue to pray for them.

Only God could give victory in such hard times.

Therefore, he continues to pray that he might see them and participate in God's process to strengthen their faith even more.

God never promised that godly living would be easy.

In fact he guarantees that it will be difficult.

Those who seek to live godly lives WILL suffer persecution.

Therefore, it's crucial that we encourage each other to trust Him.

PAUL'S CONCERN DEMONSTRATED BY HIS PRAYER

3:11-13

He continues to pray that God will enable him to go to them and that they'll continue to develop in love and faithfulness.

He prays: That he could go to them. 3:11 *"Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you."*

That their love would grow 3:12 *"and may the Lord make you multiply and overflow in love for one another and for all, as we do for you."*

Paul already thanked God for their love for each other.

He prays that love for each other will multiply and overflow.

James indicates that in times of suffering, we tend to turn inward—we look out for # 1. We focus on ourselves.

Paul prays that in times of suffering we'll think of others first; watch out for *their* needs.

He prays we'll show love to everyone—even those who persecute us!

Letter concludes focusing on the destiny of persecutors. It isn't good!

Yet he prays *WE* will even love such undeserving people!

GOD will hold *them* accountable for their evil.

But *WE* ought to love them.

That they would be strengthened 3:13 *"so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."*

He wants us to be strengthened, so we might be blameless in God's sight—strong in faith, in love, and in holiness.

LESSONS FOR US TODAY:

The ways we suffer for our faith are vastly different than those of the Thessalonians, or the Sudanese, or believers in the Middle East. However, as our culture moves farther away from our godly heritage, we can expect to suffer persecution increasingly like the Thessalonians suffered.

The affliction we suffer now is pretty subtle.

But the reality of persecution is growing around the world.

More people died for their faith in 20th C. than in previous 19 combined!

Let's not deceive ourselves, thinking we'll escape.

Principles that apply to our lives today, perhaps more in future:

1. Satan plans to use hard times to destroy our trust in God.

That's especially true for the persecuted church.

But it's also true of hard times we go through,
whether family struggles, financial troubles, work-related tension, ...

Satan wants to use them to destroy our faith and turn us away from God.

2. Satan's plan involves *keeping us isolated from each other* when times are hard.

Repeated theme in persecution literature:

when times are hard, we need each other!

Heb. 10:19 begins the *application* portion of Hebrews. Primary application:

10:23-25 *"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for He who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to **stir up one another** to love and good works, 25 **not neglecting** to meet together as is the habit of some, but **encouraging one another**, all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*

Satan spares no effort to get us to stay away from God's people. *"Satan blocked the way!"*

Have you ever noticed how, when we go through rough times,
"we don't feel like going to church today?"

Satan plants that thinking in our mind!

When we need each other most, we avoid one another.

God wants to use us to encourage each other; Satan wants to isolate us.

3. God uses *His people* to encourage us when going gets tough.

Paul desires to go to them, to encourage them in their affliction.

He's trying to get together with them.

So they can help each other out—hang in there together.

This isn't just unilateral encouragement.

As Paul seeks to encourage them to hang in there, **he's** encouraged, by watching God work in them to stabilize their faith. (3:7)

Seeing God work in others, reminds us of what God is doing.

We're encouraged also.

When God's people hang together,

we're ALL encouraged by His work in us!

That's what community groups *ought* to do *for us*! We hang together!

God designed the church to overcome Satan's attempt to destroy our faith in tough times.

Eph. 4: He gave us gifted leaders to equip His people and to "build us up," to encourage us to be all He wants us to be.

As we use our gifts to encourage each other, we face the tough times together, and overcome Satan's attempt to destroy our trust in God

4. As the community hangs together and encourages one another, Satan is defeated and God is glorified.

When the body of Christ ministers to each other as God planned, God is glorified and we get to celebrate His work.

That's why God wants us to stick together;

That's why Satan wants to isolate us.

We need each other!

We must hang together and encourage each other in the hard times.

That's the only way we'll ever survive them!

We don't know what the future holds;

the future will undoubtedly involve hard times for God's people.

Will WE be prepared for the hard times, ecause we've learned to hang together in the good times?