

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

⁹Indeed, how can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have before God on account of you? ¹⁰Night and day we are praying earnestly to see you in person and to supply what is lacking in your faith.

¹¹May God our Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹²And may the Lord increase your love and make it overflow for each other and for all people, just as ours does for you, ¹³so that he may establish your hearts as blameless in holiness before our God and Father, when our Lord Jesus comes with all his saints.

Waiting

I.

He had been forced to abandon them after only three weeks. The opposition had been making nasty allegations. Much like the accusations Annas and Caiaphas brought against Jesus in last week's gospel, the dissenters had accused Paul and Silas of dissension against Caesar because they had spoken about Jesus as a King.

The lives of Paul and Silas had been in jeopardy. So had the lives of those who had come to believe their message about Jesus. The opposing Jews had started a riot and wanted to bring Paul and Silas to mob justice. There had been little choice other than to flee.

Of course Paul had concern for the little group of Christians he left behind. He dare not go back too soon. He couldn't call or text or email them to ask how things were going. The only real choice was to send an envoy to find out how things were going. At the beginning of this chapter, Paul says: "So, when we could not stand it any longer, we thought it best to remain behind in Athens alone, ²and we sent Timothy, our brother and coworker for God in the gospel of Christ" (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, EHV).

Once Timothy had left, the only thing to do was...to wait...and wait...and wait.

Imagine Paul's concern. Only three weeks of instruction. What he had taught them was new and different; some would undoubtedly call it revolutionary. It had quickly proven dangerous in Thessolonica to call oneself a Christian. The faith of those believers in that little congregation was threatened.

How was Timothy doing? There was no way to know. He couldn't really find out if Timothy had met opposition, or if he had been identified as an associate of Paul and killed. Just keep waiting.

One day, Paul is looking around as he's going about his business and he sees Timothy coming down the road. Everything would have come to a screeching halt as Paul rushed to Timothy to hear what news he might have.

"But now, Timothy has returned to us from you and has told us the good news about your faith and love. He also told us that you always have fond memories of us and long to see us, just as much as we also long to see you" (1 Thessalonians 3:6, EHV). The news was good. The little group of Christians was still faithful to the Lord Jesus.

"Indeed, how can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have before God on account of you?" (1 Thessalonians 3:9, EHV). With all the turmoil the little group must have gone through, with all the stress from outside forces, they had stayed in their faith. To be sure, thanking God was in order—something Paul did immediately.

But his prayers weren't all just thanking God for their faith. "Night and day we are praying earnestly to see you in person and to supply what is lacking in your faith." (1

Thessalonians 3:10, EHV). Paul wanted to go back. There was a reason he desired a return to Thessalonica. As much as he was thankful that they had remained believers, their faith in Jesus was lacking.

What was lacking, do you suppose? With so little time among them, to be sure Paul wouldn't have been able to get into any detail about Jesus. Perhaps that was it. As his letter continued in the next chapter, Paul would encourage them to keep themselves away from sexual immorality. The pressures of a secular city that knew nothing of God and cared nothing about the morality God wants from his people might have had something to do with what Paul might have thought was lacking in their faith. He would also write to them about showing love to others more and more as well as instructing them about living in the last days before Jesus returns.

II.

What if Paul had sent Timothy to us? What might Timothy's report be?

Holy Trinity has been there a long time, Paul. There is so much to be thankful for. The school that started from the beginning of the congregation is still there. The children learn about math and science and history, like children in any school do. But these children have the added benefit of hearing about God's love every single school day. They are taught about Bible history in addition to their other history classes. They hear about God's plan of salvation and study the catechism.

I was there for the worship service on the First Sunday in Advent. The congregation confessed their faith in the Triune God when they recited the Apostles' Creed. They heard about the great things Jesus has done for them and for all people. They heard about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey as the crowd exclaimed "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" The people who were there for that worship service knew that Jesus had entered Jerusalem on his way to the cross.

There is a cross above their altar to remind them every week about the fact that Jesus died for the sins of the world. The empty cross reminds them that he didn't stay dead, but rose again to assure them that their sins had been paid in full and that they were assured of eternal life with Jesus. There is a baptismal font to remind them of their baptism by which they were adopted into God's family.

I heard about the Care Committee which the congregation uses to help those among them who might be in need. When someone is ill or dies, the congregation tries to support and comfort them as best they can.

They told me about the two daughter congregations they founded, congregations that also spread the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Grand Rapids area. It's good, Paul, at Holy Trinity.

And Paul would give thanks to God.

Do you think Timothy would have told Paul there are some problems, too? Would Paul be praying that he could come and supply what is lacking in our faith? Perhaps so.

While they come for worship on Sunday, there are lots of members who *don't* come. To be sure, many watch on this thing called the "livestream," but there are many more who don't. Their worship is sporadic.

Even those who come don't always live lives of faith that reflect what Jesus has done. Some of the parents who send their children to the school don't reinforce what the children learn at school and don't support the teachers. Some of those who get sick are afraid of pain and death.

Everyone is struggling right now. There is concern about what governments might require as the pandemic marches on, and concern about inflation and store shelves that

aren't as well-stocked as they used to be. Even among the Christians at Holy Trinity there are people who struggle to remain upright and moral.

III.

Then Paul might write a letter to us. In that letter would be a prayer. Paul would pray his prayer of thanksgiving for us and then he would pray that our love would grow more and more.

He would pray that we would keep things in perspective. There are so many external things that seem to get lots of time and attention during the Advent and Christmas seasons. There are parties and decorations and presents. Which way will you use them? Paul's prayer would be that they would not be the main focus, but would help focus our attention on Jesus—the greatest gift ever given to the world.

IV.

And how would Paul's prayer be answered?

His prayer is answered when we resist the temptations of the world.

It's answered when we live our Christian faith. If you are an employer, be fair and understanding with your employees. If you are an employee, work hard for your employer every day. If you are a student, study diligently to learn the material the teacher gives you. If a teacher, teach as well as you can so that your students are engaged in learning. If you volunteer, do it cheerfully. Paul's prayer is answered when we honor God with our work and our lives so that others may see what we do as being done in Jesus' name.

“And may the Lord increase your love and make it overflow for each other and for all people, just as ours does for you, ¹³so that he may establish your hearts as blameless in holiness before our God and Father, when our Lord Jesus comes with all his saints” (1 Thessalonians 3:12-13, EHV). Paul's prayer is answered when we hold firmly to the faith we have been taught. We are holy in Jesus. We are blameless because of the forgiveness he won for us. His prayer is answered as we look forward to the day Jesus will return for us and for all the saints.

As Paul finished his letter to us, he would hit the save button. (I certainly can't imagine he would write this with pen and ink in this day and age.) He would say another little prayer, thanking God for the faith God has given us and for holding us firmly in that faith despite the many pressures we face to abandon our Lord Jesus. He would conclude his prayer by asking God to keep us steadfast and firm in that faith until the day the Lord calls each one of us home.

Then...Paul would go back to work.

So do we. We go back to our work and to our lives. In everything we do we ask God that we would remain faithful to him, even to the point of death, for Jesus has promised to give us the crown of everlasting life. As we work, we will strive to overflow even more in our love for others as they struggle with the same temptations of the world; we will try to help them as they continue *their* journey of faith, strengthening them and helping them with what they may be lacking in faith as much as we are able.

For now, we wait. We wait for Christmas to come. We wait for the Lord Jesus to return. We wait to see the many ways he will continue to bless us. As we wait, we pray. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for giving us faith. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to use that faith to help strengthen others. Amen.