

## 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

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

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

## Blameless in Holiness

### I.

You dash off a quick text. An updated ETA is crucial. Everyone is going to be together, and it is necessary for the host to know when to plan dinner.

That scenario very likely occurred earlier this week. Either *you* were the one traveling to friends or relatives, or *they* were coming to you. In either case, an Estimated Time of Arrival was vital information.

Out came the phone and you dashed off a quick message. If you were at home waiting for others and not the one on the road voice-texting, you sat there staring at the screen, waiting for a reply. How long could it possibly take for your loved ones to update their status and give you the much needed information? Does it really take 15 minutes or a half-hour for them to notice your all-important text?

Paul was waiting for some information, too. He had to be a bit more patient than we are these days as he waited for a status update from Thessalonica. There wasn't any kind of reliable mail service, let alone more immediate sources of information like a phone call or a text.

The congregation in Thessalonica had been started by the Apostle Paul. He had only been able to spend three *weeks* establishing this congregation. That was not very long. Even with such a short tenure among them, Paul had developed some life-long friendships and relationships with these believers. Timothy and Silas had stayed behind when the congregation was founded, but they weren't there long, either.

How was the congregation there doing? "We wanted to come to you (I, Paul, wanted this, not just once, but twice), but Satan hindered us" (1 Thessalonians 2:18, EHV). Desperately Paul wanted to go back and see them; to find out for himself how these Christians had been getting along. He had tried to begin a journey to see them a couple of times, but somehow he was prevented. "Satan hindered us," is the way Paul put it.

So Paul had to resign himself to sending a message. Since he couldn't text or email or make a phone call, and since a postal service was unreliable to non-existent, he resorted to sending a personal messenger. Then he waited.

15 minutes to a half-hour feels like an eternity to us as we're waiting for information from our guests or from our hosts. Paul had to wait; not just minutes—or even days—but weeks, and perhaps months, for his messenger, Timothy, to return.

### II.

Paul was anxious to hear the news. There might even have been a few twinges of apprehension. All kinds of things could happen along the way there and back.

“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 long-awaited reply had come, and much of the news was good. The little group of Christians had maintained their faith in Jesus. Like Paul, they were longing for a visit when they could see each other face-to-face.

Some of the news Timothy brought was not as good. Something is lacking in their faith. They haven’t always been *living* their faith.

Today’s reading is Paul’s prayer right in the middle of his letter to the Thessalonians. After today’s reading he begins to talk about sexual sins. Apparently that was among the chief problems among this group of Christians. It’s not so unusual today, either. Temptations toward sexual impropriety have always been a problem for believers, partly because sexual impropriety is so blatant and obvious in society and among the unbelievers around them.

But Paul doesn’t start his prayer with the problems. He says: “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). Despite the challenges to their faith, the Thessalonian Christians had held on to their faith, and even *grown* in it. They had reached out to others in their community. There were plenty of reasons to be thankful.

But Paul wanted something more. “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 visit to share their joy, to be sure, but he wanted something more than just a social visit where they could catch up on what was going on in everyone’s life. Paul also wanted to share what they were lacking.

When people come to faith in Jesus, they might understand the basics. The basics are important.

As Christians grow and mature in faith, God’s Word shapes us. The more information we have from the Bible, the stronger our faith will be. By nature human beings are totally sinful. Every person needs to know that God takes sin seriously. Sin separates a person from God.

Of course, if one knows only about sin and that it separates us from God, that would lead to despair. It is vital to know about God’s grace. God made a plan to deal with sin, once and for all. Jesus carried out God’s plan by dying on the cross for the sins of all.

Paul talked about what was lacking in the faith of the Thessalonian Christians. In every generation of Christianity there have been false teachers, even in the early church of Paul’s day. False teachers lead people into misunderstandings that threaten faith. As much as it was a problem then, it is still a problem today. As long as you are alive, there is still something lacking in your faith; in other words, there is *always* still more to be learned about God and his love for you.

### III.

“And may the Lord increase your love and make it overflow for each other and for all people, just as ours does for you” (1 Thessalonians 3:12, EHV).

One of the things the Thessalonians didn’t lack was love. They showed their love for others by sharing the gospel. Paul wanted that love to increase even more.

God wants the same for you and me. God the Holy Spirit has worked faith in our hearts. Faith isn’t to be dead, but living and active. Faith is to be part of our lives. What our Savior did for us in bringing us forgiveness is something that is to be reflected in our lives as

Christians.

Paul wants this love to “increase” and “overflow” first of all “for each other.” Christians share a bond of faith, especially Christians who are in fellowship with one another and understand God’s Word the same way. The people you gather with here at Holy Trinity face similar challenges to faith. We also have similar frustrations about our ability to live that faith as well as we know we “should.” Every one of us can show love to those around us who need that same support. That’s one of the main reasons we exist as a congregation—to build one another up in faith and love.

But then there is more. Paul wants our love to “increase” and “overflow” also “for all people.” We are to continue sharing the Good News of God’s love for sinners with others, just as someone in the past shared it with us.

#### IV.

As Paul began this letter he said: “Dear brothers, loved by God, we know that God has chosen you” (1 Thessalonians 1:4, EHV). The footnote in the Evangelical Heritage Version reminds us that the context often indicates, as is the case here, that Paul was talking to the entire congregation, both brothers and sisters in Christ. They were already considered believers, chosen by God, as are you.

It is as people who are already believers, chosen by God, that Paul prays that the Lord would increase and overflow our love for one another and for others. It is “So 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 3:13, EHV).

Since he is talking about believers, Paul is not praying that we *become* believers. It isn’t a gradual process, or something you and I produce or decide on our own. That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

So when Paul prays that God would establish you and me as blameless in holiness, he is praying that you and I would live in such a way that others see your Christian faith. They might want to know more about what makes Christians the way they are, just by your actions.

So now we get back to our work as believers.

We ask that God would keep us faithful to him, even to the point of death. We help those who struggle in their own lives of faith; rather than jumping to criticize the failings of other believers, we look for ways to help them build their faith and make it stronger.

It is as those blameless in holiness that we begin our Advent season today. We anticipate the birth of the King who came to make our holiness and blamelessness a reality. The Baby in the manger is coming. He is the One who comes riding on a donkey in today’s Gospel with the sole purpose of finishing the journey of salvation on the cross for us.

He made us holy and blameless before him. God grant that we might share the news of the holiness and blamelessness he won for all with those we meet and those we know. Amen.