

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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The First Epistle to the Thessalonians: Chapter 3

New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.

Introduction

I had the misfortune of having my mobile phone completely fail recently. It was quite odd knowing that I had lost a normal means of keeping in touch with people and being able to find out quickly what was going on. In many ways, this was rather liberating as nobody could contact me. But on one of the days, I was working in the office. It was a bit disconcerting to think that while I was there I would not be able to quickly get in touch with my wife, and this was particularly noticeable on my commute home when I knew that I had no means of contacting anyone.

What luxury we live in though, where in normal circumstances we can travel and contact people so easily. Our passage today comes from a time where a trip to another town could take several weeks. News of how people were doing could take weeks or months to arrive. Perhaps we should all 'loose' our mobile phones for a little bit to appreciate something of what it used to be like to have such limited communication options! Later, I may even give some reasons why it would be worth doing such a thing and the benefits it may give!

For now, we can start to consider our subject, which is the third in a series of 6 looking at the first epistle of Thessalonians. This epistle was written by the apostle Paul. The third in the series just so happens to fall naturally in line with the third chapter of the letter. As there are only thirteen verses in chapter 3, I will read all of it now.

“Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow labourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. 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 labour might be in vain.

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you - therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God, night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith? Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. And may the Lord make

you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.”

An Overview

By all accounts, our chapter today is actually quite a straightforward passage of the Bible. There are certainly no difficult doctrinal topics to consider as we look through the verses. However, the issues raised in the chapter are no less challenging. Paul is primarily providing a clear demonstration of how we are to care for our fellow believers. But as well as this, he is also touching on a topic which is becoming increasingly important in the world around us, that is, looking out for people that we are around regularly.

At my workplace, we are constantly being reminded to look out for each other and make sure we check that people are okay. In society in general, there are all sorts of initiatives about making sure people who are lonely or struggling are getting support or contact from someone somewhere. Indeed, the church has been at the forefront of these issues for many years, pioneering orphanages, hospital care, education and provision for those who have a disability. Most established institutes were started many years ago by philanthropic Christians at a time when most of the needy and disadvantaged had been abandoned by society around them. Why is this? Because Christianity teaches us to have a concern for those in need. Our chapter today is one of the parts of the Bible that shows the mindset that we should have in our concern for one another.

In the Apostle Paul, we are given the example of someone who is genuinely worried about the state of young believers, when circumstances forced him to leave them prematurely behind. This concern arose because believers are intrinsically linked through our Lord Jesus Christ, and as such the situation of one part of His church impacts the other parts. We have a practical demonstration here of Paul’s teaching on the one Body of Christ which is given in Chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians.

Paul’s Concern

The first five verses are a clear indication of the genuineness of the concern that the apostle Paul had for the Thessalonian believers. This chapter follows straight on from the last few verses of the previous chapter which describes how Paul had been forced away from the Thessalonian believers earlier than he had wanted to. It also stated that Satan had time and again prevented his return. They were still very new Christians, and his concern was that they may be discouraged by the persecution that they were now enduring alone, without his support.

It is remarkable that Paul’s sole concern here is regarding the spiritual state of the Thessalonian believers. Given that they were undergoing persecution (and we know from Acts chapter 17 verse 5, where Jason’s house is attacked by a mob, that this included physical violence). It is worth noting that this aspect is given no real mention in this letter. I expect that Paul knew that a strong spiritual state would enable them to endure everything else. He was also aware that an active Christian walk will inevitably result in persecution. Here the priority is clearly shown in terms of where the care should be for each other as fellow believers.

Paul’s example has an even more striking feature. He was the busy missionary, and one who was constantly under threat of persecution. Yet despite this, his concern and care for the Thessalonians was such that he was willing to inconvenience himself to ensure that they were strengthened. So, Paul sends Timothy back to the Thessalonians to encourage and strengthen them in their difficulties. Timothy was no small part of Paul’s team. Paul states in Philippians chapter 2, verse 20, that there was nobody so like-minded as Timothy was. Paul effectively sent his right-hand man in order to express this concern that he had.

The Response

Verses six to ten of our chapter provides a wonderful response to the positive report that Timothy brings back about the Thessalonian church. This is not just a sense that Paul and Silvanus were pleased to hear things were going well, and that this niggling worry was now off their minds. Paul was actually feeling better for the news. It enabled him to go on stronger than before. They could rejoice more before God and they had an even greater, and more earnest desire to be with the Thessalonians again to continue what they have been stopped from doing earlier.

Again, there is no mention here about the Thessalonians' physical state or their everyday well-being. Paul brings out from Timothy's report that their faith and love were still strong and bearing up to the persecution they were suffering from. This is enough for Paul and it is this that he uses for strength in his own struggles along the Christian pathway.

The Situation for all Believers

We then turn to the last few verses of our chapter, verses 11 to 13. This is almost a heartfelt prayer from the apostle regarding the continuation of the Thessalonians' walk. As such we can easily apply it to ourselves. We have here a very simple guide for our lives which is centred around the demonstration of love, specifically to our fellow believers, and in general to those we are around on a regular basis. Not only is this an example – that Paul gives in his care for the Thessalonians in this chapter – but it reminds us of that command of the Lord Jesus to the disciples in the Gospel of John, chapter 13, verses 34 and 35. In Thessalonians chapter 3, there is another demonstration of how the love of God is to be shown in our lives, showing that it is a continual theme throughout the New Testament.

The Apostle is effectively saying that showing love to our fellow believers is what should be occupying our time with, when the Lord returns to take us to be with him. If you consider all of the activity that Paul was involved with in his life, yet this was the pinnacle – that he wanted to be found showing love for his fellow believers when brought to be with the Lord. But, of course, this stands to reason because it was exactly what the Lord Himself was doing at the end of His life. He is our ultimate example in everything, and He was showing the love of God to the world during His time on the earth, even as it drew to a close.

We cannot fail to be challenged by this passage. Our thoughts towards our fellow believers should be coloured by the fact that the Lord may well return to take us to be with Himself at any given moment. How often do we hear of those sad occasions where someone has lost a loved one suddenly, but it has happened following a falling out or disagreement? There remains that thought of regret that those were the last words they shared between themselves which did not reflect the true feelings that should have been shown. Are we not to have those same concerns when we consider the fellow believers who we meet with on a regular basis?

What about us today?

I think it is now worth considering how we can apply this to our situation today and some of the things that I have been challenged by as I have studied this passage for this talk. This is particularly important as we live in a world which increasingly suggesting that we look after 'number one'. Doing what is 'right' for me at the time, and if it is not 'right', then I can cast off anything in order to have what I need. I am not suggesting for one moment that extremes should be taken where people have to continue in dangerous or damaging situations. But there is a reminder here that the world around us does not promote the same attitude that we ought to show in Christian relationships that we are shown in the teachings of the New Testament.

This brings me to my first point, and this is regarding the attitude towards our local assembly or church. The apostle was always at pains to speak of how he had sought to serve those whom he was amongst. Do we have that same thought? Often, we think of what we expect to receive from the church we attend. This is an important consideration, and we should ensure that we are being taught sound doctrine, and receiving care and love. But we are also required to have that thought of service and concern for those we meet with. If we find ourselves concerned solely about what we can take and gain from a church, but do not consider what we may ourselves provide or the way in which we can serve, then we have missed the point of Thessalonians chapter 3 and much of the instruction we see in other epistles. If our thinking is astray in this point, then the force of the chapter will never really make sense to us. We will simply regard this chapter as an unattainable ideal that we expect from others, rather than the challenge to ourselves that it ought to be.

But let us move onto the next point that I want to consider which is to look at what our concern entails. I have already mentioned the fact that Paul does not speak at all about the Thessalonians' physical condition. In verse two of our chapter, Paul clearly states where his concern for the Thessalonians was. It was their faith. That was what Timothy had been sent to strengthen.

So here is the challenge, what is the balance of concern in our prayers and care for our fellow believers? It is a difficult subject as we absolutely must pray for real needs and issues when they come up. We should pray for those who are sick and unwell. We should pray for physical needs that we have. But the question is there, do we bring up the spiritual needs and growth of others as much as these more common requests we make? If you look through all of the epistles of Paul, they are always full of prayer for the spiritual well-being of those he is writing to.

Perhaps one of the things that makes this difficult is that such concerns for a believer's spiritual condition requires continuous effort. It can be easier to be concerned about immediate sets of problems that arise. Prayer meetings can quickly be convened to bring things such as an illness before the Lord. We are good at such response and action. But the concern for the believers' spiritual well-being requires perseverance and may never see an obvious end or result. It is no coincidence that Paul would often state things like "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians chapter 1, verses 2 and 3). There are of course several similar statements that could be quoted. This was a real work of love that Paul undertook, and he saw this as the primary concern that he should have for other believers.

Paul also shows which, between immediate physical needs and ongoing spiritual state, should be the priority, and it is not an unreasonable thing to bring out. It is, after all, to do with the relationship with God and how we see our lives in this world. If our spiritual condition is good and we are walking close with God, then all these other troubles and trials can be endured, managed and given their proper place. Those who are not spiritually healthy will meet such hardship head on and potentially be shipwrecked as they try to cope with such things. Paul knew this better than most given the trials he went through, and he wanted other believers to be equipped to cope with such things as well, fully aware of the fact "that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" as it says in Romans 8 verse 18. But this is a challenge to everyone, and one that we will always have to work on.

But then I move to my last point here which is the level of concern we have – whether it has the same impact that was evident in the Apostle Paul's life. There are a lot of similarities to the first point I made about our attitude towards those in our local church. That was the general principle, whereas this challenge is now to consider what level such service and care should be. This idea is picked up throughout this epistle in general, with the apostle urging his readers to continue and strengthen the love and care between each other. Verse 14 of Chapter 5 is a particularly good example of this, with the encouragement to help those who are struggling. But chapter 3 shows

that this is not only an activity we should be engaged in, but something that actually affects us in a more personal way.

Now, I would be unwise to suggest ways in which this should be shown. Paul was clearly adversely impacted and therefore could not work as effectively as a result. This worry clearly got him feeling quite low. But we all deal with things differently, so to suggest a particular response would be difficult and misguided. However, what can be said is that there was action to the problem, and we can all act in some similar way. The very least would be prayer – to bring it before God. Our example from Paul was that he sent Timothy to find out how things were and to help. As I have already said, this was not a minimal response from the apostle. So once again we are challenged as to our response. Are we prepared to do something about it whenever there is a concern? It goes back to the comment that I made about spiritual concern being a long-term, continuous effort. Are we concerned enough that we are prepared to make such a commitment? It may mean having to have difficult conversations, it may mean much time taken up in prayer, or being inconvenienced. These are all things that the world around us doesn't really support. Their attitude is, if it is a burden to me, or not what I need, I am encouraged to cast it off and find what is right for me. Once again though, this is not the teaching of the Bible.

If anyone feels this is a bit much though, perhaps promoting an aspect of Christianity that is really only reserved for full time workers or those who have responsibilities in the church, we must of course turn to our ultimate example in the Lord Jesus. We know that He was concerned for our spiritual state, and how thankful we are that such was His concern that He did indeed act! In coming into this world, it showed that ultimate care, and incomprehensible inconvenience, in order to meet our helpless state. We know that it is not always appreciated, as many people reject the salvation that Christ obtained by giving His life at Calvary. But that does not lessen or remove the fact that He came to where each one of us was in order to help us spiritually. He continues this care now in heaven. He is not idle, but constantly acts as our High Priest interceding for us as we have our daily failures. How much this should stir us up to have a care for our fellow believers, even if it is nowhere near the same level as the Lord's care for us. The Lord's example cannot be dismissed for we are encouraged to be more like Him every day as we walk down here. The totality of His care and love was after all, His greatest work, which will be worshipped and praised for all eternity.

Conclusion

I do not want to say much more about this chapter now. I will simply reiterate its important practical lessons for us. We are challenged by it to consider our attitude and concern for our fellow believers. We are challenged on what we are concerned about and the level of our concern and how much it forms part of our Christian walk. It is useful to have Paul as an example recorded for us here. I have often remarked that although Christ is our ultimate example, the fact that He is the Son of God could be used as an excuse for us to fall short, not that I would suggest that this is really a valid excuse. But, in Paul we have an example that shows that although we can never meet Christ's excellent and wonderful example, we are nevertheless required to try to do so despite our shortcomings, as the Apostle Paul did from his conversion. May we all be challenged to have such care for our fellow believers in our lives.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on The First Epistle to the Thessalonians: Chapter 3, talk number T1206.

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