

“Maturing in Faith”
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
(Preached at Trinity, August 25, 2019)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As we've seen, Paul had the heart of a shepherd, of a pastor. He loved those God had placed under his care.

Chapter 3 opens with Paul's determination to send Timothy to minister to them and bring back a report.

Remember, this is during Paul's Second Missionary Journey.

- Leaving Thessalonica Paul and his companions traveled to Berea
 - From Berea Paul then traveled to Athens. It was from Athens that Timothy began his journey.
 - Paul then proceeded to Corinth, which is where he received Timothy's report and where this letter originated.
- a. Paul was filled with great joy over hearing of their faith and love.
1 Thessalonians 3:7 NAU - "in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith" – "*because of your faith*"
 - b. Paul said it was like a fresh breath of life. For Paul, it was the meaning and purpose of his life. Such news was invigorating.
1 Thes 3:8 NAU - "for now we *really* live, if you stand firm in the Lord."

2. Hearing this good report from Timothy only made Paul desire all the more to see them face to face. He was overjoyed to hear that they were standing firm in their faith, but he desired to see them growing more and more.
3. Although Paul was overjoyed that they were standing firm in their faith, he knew there was still much they were lacking.

1 Thessalonians 3:10 NAU - "as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith"

- A. This was a relatively new congregation. Their leadership would not have had formal training in the doctrines of Christianity. The NT was still being written. Copies of the OT Scriptures were not plentiful. Paul knew they needed the benefit of sound preaching and teaching.
- B. Paul also knew the important truth that no Christian reaches full maturity this side of glorification. All of us are lacking in our faith and knowledge of Christ.

4. While Paul's letters were weighty, his heart was to see them personally. Paul's ministry was largely a teaching ministry—preaching the Gospel of Christ and strengthening Christians in the faith. He knew he would be most effective with personal visits. This was often the focus of his prayers.

Romans 1:9-11 NAU - "For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the *preaching of the gospel* of His Son, is my witness *as to* how unceasingly I make mention of you,¹⁰ always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.¹¹ For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established"

Philippians 1:8 NAU - "For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus."

2 Timothy 1:3-4 NAU - "I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day,⁴ longing to see you, even as I recall your tears, so that I may be filled with joy."

5. Paul's great desire was to see these Christians strengthened spiritually. This is the heart of every pastor. Numerical growth is only the side benefit of a faithful ministry. Sadly, too often it is the primary focus.

The chief work of a shepherd is not increasing the size of his flock but in caring for the sheep. It is an arduous task. There will always be weak sheep, sick sheep, and stubborn sheep. Sheep need a faithful shepherd. Jesus Christ is our Great Shepherd who cares for His sheep. But He has also provided earthly shepherds to care for His sheep.

Tim Challies writes: "Sheep are prone to wander. Even if you put them in an absolutely perfect environment with everything they need (things like green pastures and still waters), sooner or later they will just wander off. If a shepherd doesn't manage them, if he doesn't micromanage them and keep them under constant surveillance, they'll wander off and be lost. They are also *defenseless*. Left to themselves, sheep will not and cannot last very long. Just about any other domesticated animal can be returned to the wild and will stand a fighting chance of survival. But not sheep. Put a sheep in the wild and you've just given nature a snack. Sheep are dumb and directionless and defenseless. So, I guess when God says that we are sheep who need a shepherd, he doesn't mean it as a compliment to us. It is just a very realistic assessment of who we are and what we need. We are sheep who are completely dependent upon a shepherd."¹

6. Paul saw himself as a shepherd. His great desire was to arrive at Thessalonica so that he could shepherd God's sheep.

He describes the purpose of his trip: "to complete what is lacking in your faith."

7. As I said last time, there is a theological axiom that the Christian life is one of progress. We continue to grow in the faith.

A. This morning I want us to consider Paul's use of the word faith in **Verse 10**

1 Thessalonians 3:10 NAU - "that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?"

B. Then, I want us to ponder how Paul was going to complete what was lacking in their faith.

¹ Tim Challies. Challies.com, August 26, 2013

8. What does Paul mean when he speaks of their faith? What exactly is faith? Paul refers to their “faith” several times in **Chapter 3**

1 Thessalonians 3:2 NAU - "we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith"

1 Thessalonians 3:5 NAU - "For this reason, when I could endure *it* no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain."

1 Thessalonians 3:6 NAU - "But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love"

1 Thessalonians 3:7 NAU - "we were comforted about you through your faith;"

1 Thessalonians 3:10 NAU - "that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?"

9. The writer of Hebrews defines faith:

Hebrews 11:1 NAU - "Now faith is the assurance of *things hoped for*, the conviction of things not seen."

In other words, faith is confidence in things that are not apparent to our eyes, things not seen.

- A. Our secular culture uses the word often. Someone will be going through a crisis and they'll say, "I'm just keeping the faith." Or they'll say, "I have faith that it will turn out ok." For most it is faith is nothing more than a vague hope. There is no substance to their faith and no object as to where they direct their faith. This isn't the nature of Christian faith.
- B. Christian faith is a grace whereby we are enabled to rest with confidence upon the promises of God. Saving faith is trusting in the claims of the Gospel.
Faith demands knowing the claims of the Gospel. Faith is never void of truth.
Faith is not credulity, or belief without evidence. It is not vainly hoping that all will be well.

- I. The word faith in the New Testament is understood in two ways:

- A. Faith can be understood as referring to the Christian experience of faith. It refers to the faith in Christ shared by all believers—the lively trust and confidence in the perfect work of Christ.

- 1. We are saved by grace through faith—this faith is a resting fully upon Christ alone as He is presented in the Gospel.
- 2. This faith extends to the whole of life. We trust Him in all things.
- 3. This faith can be both great and small.

Jesus sometimes censured His disciples for their little faith.

Matthew 8:24-26 NAU - "And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being covered with the waves; but Jesus Himself was asleep. ²⁵ And they came to *Him* and woke Him, saying, "Save *us*, Lord; we are perishing!" ²⁶ He said to them, "Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?" Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm."

- B. Faith is also used to describe the system of belief that defines Christianity—sometimes preceded by the article “the” – The Faith. It is inseparable from the essence of Christianity itself.

Ephesians 4:11-13 NAU - "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."

Acts 6:7 NAU - "The word of God kept in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith."

Galatians 1:23-24 NAU - "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they were glorifying God because of me."

1 Timothy 3:8-9 NAU - "Deacons likewise *must* be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, ⁹ *but* holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience."

1 Timothy 4:1 NAU - "But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons"

1 Timothy 4:6 NAU - "In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, *constantly* nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following."

1 Timothy 5:8 NAU - "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

1 Timothy 6:10 NAU - "For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

C. There are times when the word can be used interchangeably – both the experience of faith as well as the substance of faith.

2 Corinthians 13:5 NAS - "Test yourselves *to see if you are in the faith*; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you-- unless indeed you fail the test?"

1. Test your experience of faith. Are you truly trusting Christ? Do you love Him for who He is or only for what He can do for you?
2. Test the substance of your faith. Are you living in a manner consistent with the claims of Biblical Christianity—are you continuing in the faith?
3. These two concepts cannot be separated. We trust Christ but this trust is not void of knowledge. Our trust or faith is weak if our knowledge is deficient.

D. We need to understand both of these elements of faith as we look at **Verse 10**

1. On one hand, Paul is describing their unwavering confidence in Christ
2. In spite of persecution they were remaining steadfast in their trust and belief in Jesus Christ. One of the marks of saving faith is perseverance. Paul was concerned that their faith might be proven false. That due to persecution they had fallen away.

1 Thessalonians 3:5 NAU - "I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain."

Matthew 13:20-21 NAU - "The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet he has no *firm* root in himself, but is *only* temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away."

3. Paul sent Timothy to investigate their faith and to teach and encourage them so that their faith would become even stronger—that their confidence in the life and work of Christ might be firm; that they would stand upon a solid assurance.
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- 1 Thessalonians 3:2 NAU** - "we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith"
4. On the other hand, Paul wanted to see them growing in their knowledge of the doctrines of Christianity. Paul wanted to come to them personally so that he might instruct them and strengthen them in their faith.

II. How were the Thessalonians to grow in their faith? How were they to fill what was lacking in their faith?

A. We must not diminish the work of God by His Spirit

1. The increase of our faith is a work of God

Philippians 1:6 NAU - "*For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

2. God often uses His works of Providence to strengthen our faith. Through the experiences of life, our faith is tried and strengthened. Seeing Him at work as we go through the storms of life strengthens our faith.
3. Watching other mature brothers and sisters as they weather the storms increases our own faith. Paul understood the importance of his example as he walked before the churches.
4. It also increases our faith as mature brothers and sisters encourage us as we go through our times of adversity. It would have been encouraging to the Thessalonians for Timothy to come and encourage them.

1 Thessalonians 3:2 NAU - "we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith,"

B. It is also true that prayer is a means of increasing our faith

1. Paul knew that God would use his prayers to increase the faith of the saints

Ephesians 3:14-19 NAU - "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, ¹⁶ that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God."

2. Our faith is increased and strengthened by our own personal prayer life as we commune with God through Christ as the Holy Spirit strengthens our faith.
- C. Paul knew, however, that the chief means of strengthening our faith was the Word of God.
1. The more we learn of Christ, the greater our confidence grows in Him.
2 Peter 3:18 NAU - "but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him *be* the glory, both now and to the day of eternity."
 2. Paul knew their faith would be strengthened and built up upon objective truth. This is what he meant by the statement –
"may complete what is lacking in your faith?"
 3. Saving faith has substance – it is intimately connected to the Gospel. Christianity is fixed upon a body of truth.
 4. You hear me often say, you don't have to be a theologian to be saved but there are certain truths that cannot be separated from the Gospel that commands belief.
 - a. You have to understand Biblical teaching of sin and condemnation – the Gospel has no meaning without it.
 - b. You have to understand the cross of Christ. This was the substance of Paul's preaching and must be central to all preaching.
1 Corinthians 2:2 NAU - "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."
 - c. You have to understand the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection is the validation that the sacrifice of Christ was received and accepted by God. It satisfied God's divine justice. It confirms that our Mediator is risen and is seated at the right hand of Majesty where He is functioning as Prophet, Priest, and King.
 - d. You have to understand Jesus' right to rule over you. His Lordship is the essence of genuine repentance.
 5. "The faith" refers to the doctrines upon which the church stands. We hold to the Christian faith. This was the faith that was now owned by the Thessalonians. They were continuing in the faith.
 6. Paul knew there were areas of their understanding that needed to be informed. They needed to be taught. They were confused about some important areas of Christian doctrine. This would have an effect upon their faith.
- D. What is the chief means whereby we are built up in the faith? What is the chief way God increases our faith?
1. The Word of God is the source of our growth, the means of our sanctification. Paul says it performs its work in those who believe.
1 Thessalonians 2:13 NAU - "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted *it* not as the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe."

2. Paul sent Timothy came to teach them because the Word of God is the chief means of making us complete.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 NAU - "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

ἀρτιος - complete

Paul was desiring to come to complete what was lacking in their faith.

3. This consistent with Paul's teaching to the Ephesian elders:

Acts 20:32 NAU - "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

Conclusion:

1. Our faith is not merely a subjective feeling. It is based upon objective truth. If our understanding is weak, our faith will also be weak.
 - A. There is a presumption that these new believers would be hungry for the Word of God. It wasn't likely that Paul would arrive and gather the sheep but half of them did not show up because they'd gone fishing.
 - B. Sheep will eagerly follow their shepherd to the green pastures. You must search your own heart regarding your hunger for the Word of God. Do you eagerly read it? Do you feel compelled to join in corporate Bible study to learn more of the doctrines of Christianity? This is the chief source of growth for the Christian.
2. This is why we place such emphasis upon the Word of God and sound doctrine. It will strengthen and mature your faith.

Calvin writes: "From this also it appears how necessary it is for us to give careful attention to doctrine, for teachers were not appointed merely with the view of leading men, in the course of a single day or month, to the faith of Christ, but for the purpose of perfecting the faith which has been begun."²
3. Our shield of faith is not disconnected from our sharp two-edged sword.

As Satan seeks to overthrow us, our faith is strengthened as we rest upon the truth of God's Word. Only then can we adequately defend ourselves from Satan's lies and deceits that he throws at us by way of flaming arrows.

Ephesians 6:16 NAU - "in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one."
4. As we mature and our faith is strengthened, our confidence is greatly increased as we face the battles of life and the relentless attacks of the evil one.

² Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 13:75.