

## LABORING WITH CHRIST IN GOSPEL MINISTRY

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Ben Janssen | 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5 | October 25, 2020

<sup>1</sup> Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, <sup>2</sup> and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, <sup>3</sup> that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. <sup>4</sup> For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. <sup>5</sup> 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.

Although I'm no medical professional, like many of you I have taken a basic CPR course. Training ordinary folks like you and me to help someone in a medical emergency is no replacement for the professionals, but it is essential to saving lives. A medical professional is not always available to help someone in those first moments of a crisis.

The passage before us reminds us that the same thing is true in the ministry of the gospel. Every Christian needs some basic training in this work, for God's people are constantly in danger. There is a conspiracy under way that seeks to sabotage the souls of Christian disciples. And it is paramount that every Christian knows how to counteract the conspiracy.

In these verses we come to understand the danger we all face, the help we need, and the outcome we desire.

### THE DANGER WE FACE

So let's get right to it. We are told quite straightforwardly in this passage what danger we should know about, what threat there is to our souls. In verse 3, we read that Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica on a mission "to establish and exhort" the believers there in their faith, so "that no one be moved by these afflictions." That's the danger every Christian needs to know about and be prepared to counteract. It's the danger of "afflictions" that can "move" us.

### All Sorts of Afflictions

What are these "afflictions"? For the Thessalonians, they were real persecutions coming at them from their own countrymen (v. 14). But the word Paul uses for *afflictions* means "trouble that inflicts distress."<sup>1</sup> Physical persecution is one way to bring distress, but it isn't the only way. Tragedy will do it, too. We can sense the distress of the parents of a young girl that some of us know who died when their home exploded one morning. We can imagine the distress of the parents of a college student who lived next-door to my son when he was found dead last week after a drug overdose.

The experience of distress is a rather well-known human condition. We can find ourselves under distress almost without explanation, can't we?

## **Yielding Ground**

But even here we should notice that the real danger is not the afflictions nor the distress that comes from it but being “moved” by them. The verb is found only here in the Greek New Testament. But it is the opposite of what Paul says in the next chapter. In 1 Thessalonians 3:8 he says, “For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.” To “stand fast” is the opposite of to be “moved” in 1 Thessalonians 2:3.<sup>2</sup>

So whatever afflictions a Christian may face, the real danger is that one will be “moved,” that one will cede ground in their Christian faith. And it doesn’t always take physical afflictions to accomplish that. In 1858, Ralph Waldo Emerson declared that whatever hold the public worship service had on people in America, it was now gone, or at least going. “It has lost its grasp on the affection of the good, and the fear of the bad,” he said. Then he observed, “In the country, neighborhoods, half the parishes are signing off, to use the local term.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus the affliction that has brought distress on much of the Western World is not outright persecution but something even more sinister. Michael Horton says it is not so much something that happens *to* the church but something happening *in* the church. It is the process of secularization, “the gradual conformity of our thinking, beliefs, commitments, and practices to the pattern of this fading age.”<sup>4</sup>

## **The Real Enemy**

So let no one say they are safe. We are all under attack, whether the attack comes from without or subtly from within. We have an enemy who is trying to get us to move one way or the other away from our Christian faith. He is the reason there is a real danger to our souls.

You see, Paul wants the Thessalonians to know that the person behind the afflictions was not ultimately the hostile mob or the city authorities. The master mind who was trying to get these new believers to budge on their faith, to be moved, was “the tempter,” as verse 5 says. The afflictions were the work of Satan himself.

If the Bible is to be believed, this is who our battle truly is against. We do not wrestle against flesh and blood—against the Democrats or the Republicans—but against “the cosmic powers . . . , against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). There truly is a conspiracy going on right now, but the person behind it is not a member of Antifa or QAnon. Your great adversary is the devil himself.

It’s time that we take him seriously, brothers and sisters. There is a real threat to your soul, and it is all being orchestrated by Satan. Yes, there is a battle going on, a battle for our souls, and we need to know how to fight it successfully. Do you know how?

## **THE HELP WE NEED**

We can learn how by observing what Paul and his team did to come to the aid of the believers in Thessalonica. What is the help that is needed given the danger our souls face?

## **Pastoral Care**

What Paul did is he “sent Timothy” back to Thessalonica (v. 2). Don’t miss the obvious implication here. Where a crime is being committed, we call for law enforcement. If there is a fire, we call the fire department. If the emergency is medical, we call the ambulance. Where souls are in danger, you can’t automate the help they need. A.I. won’t work here. You need a real person.

What kind of person? Paul said he wanted to go back, and tried to find a way to get back, but had been unable to do so (1 Thess 2:18). The decision was made to send Timothy. Now Timothy is a relatively young man and new to Christian ministry. He was a man of character and integrity (Acts 16:2). But he’s not a pastor, not yet anyway.

But look at what Paul says about him. Not only is he a “brother”—a fellow Christian—but Paul also calls him “God’s coworker in the gospel of Christ.” This is high praise, indeed. In fact, you may notice a footnote in your English Bible indicating that many ancient manuscripts read God’s “servant” rather than God’s “coworker.” Undoubtedly this is because referring to him in this latter way makes it sound more like he is God’s colleague, an equal, rather than a mere helper in God’s work.<sup>5</sup> But Paul uses both words of himself in 1 Corinthians 3, God’s “servant” (v. 5) and God’s “coworker”<sup>6</sup> (v. 9), indicating that the two can be used as synonyms.

Nevertheless, this is still high praise for the young and inexperienced Timothy. And it tells us something important about Christian ministry.

## **Ordinary Ministry**

Paul’s description of Timothy is not just a display of honor. There’s a theological point being made here. Paul and all others engaged in the kind of task that Timothy was sent to Thessalonica to do are all workers in the kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup> The care of souls is so essential that we cannot leave the work entirely to the professionals.

Undoubtedly Paul was most qualified for this work, but he couldn’t get to Thessalonica. He sent Timothy, but Timothy’s task was not to go be the pastor. He would soon return back to Paul, his mission accomplished (3:6). And as we read on in the letter, we will see that Paul expected the believers in Thessalonica to learn to do this ministry themselves.

What do we learn from this? We learn that there is a real danger we all face as Christians, a real threat to our faith. We need to take the threat seriously. We need to counteract the threat. We need workers in the care of souls. Yes, we need trained, official pastors (the elders) in the church to ensure the work is being done, but this is every-member ministry that the Bible commends. If you are a Christian, you need your soul cared for by other Christians. And if you are a Christian, you also need to be in the business of soul care for your brothers and sisters in the church.

## **Basic Training**

So what do you do? Timothy was sent to counteract the conspiracy against the souls of the believers in Thessalonica. Timothy would undoubtedly try to relieve the afflictions if he could, but

clearly that was not his main task. His main task was not to remove the assaults on their faith, but to strengthen their defenses. Like reinforcing the walls of a fort under attack.

All Christians need some basic training in this, like many of us non-medical professionals get training in CPR. It's that important. You could well save a soul from death.

### **THE OUTCOME WE DESIRE**

Indeed, this is the outcome we desire in Christian ministry, so let it sink in: by laboring with Christ in gospel ministry *you very well may save a soul from death*. I'm not exaggerating; I'm quoting from the Bible. James says that "if anyone among you wanders from the truth" (there's the danger we face) and "someone brings him back" (there's the help we need) then we should understand what has just happened. "Let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (Jas 5:19-20).

When gospel ministry achieves its outcome, we need to understand what has just happened, because it won't be immediately obvious. We might not know that we just saved a soul from death. We might be oblivious to how critical we were in diverting a crisis with eternal ramifications. Just because we don't see or feel the crisis of the moment doesn't mean there isn't one. But this is the outcome of Christian ministry: the arrival of final salvation, the entering into the fully consummated kingdom of God. The stakes couldn't be higher.

### **Established with Truth**

So how do we do the work? What do you say and what do you do to "establish" and "exhort" someone in the faith? There has to be a lot of ways to answer that question, but in verses 3-4, we get a hint at the general answer, one that every Christian can faithfully offer in ministry to one another.

What we find here is Paul reminding the Thessalonians of what they already knew: "we are destined for this." He says that when they were there with the Thessalonians, they had made it plain that suffering affliction was in their future. What is striking about all this is that right off the bat, basic to Christian discipleship, is this teaching. As one commentator says, "The theology of suffering was a centerpiece in early Christian teaching, unlike many muddled modern theologies that promise prosperity and the absence of trouble as the fruits of true faith."<sup>8</sup> The Christian teaching is this: "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12). Acts 14:21-22 tells us that "When they had preached the gospel ... and had made many disciples," Paul and his team strengthened "the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Jesus himself told his disciples of the coming trials "to keep you from falling away" (Jn 16:1-4).

The temptation we all face is to seek immediate comfort in our afflictions. After all, who wants to suffer? We all want relief. That's Satan's appeal to get us to move. Christian ministry is about helping each other stay the course in spite of the temptation to find immediate relief. Because the temporary hardship is worth it for the outcome of all that we've been promised in the kingdom of God.

## **Ministry Anxiety**

This is the greatest battle in the universe, and to take up the call to minister is to take up the call of a first responder. It comes with some real risks.

When we read this passage, we can see the risks. In the first verse, Paul speaks of the ongoing separation he was enduring from the Thessalonians, and that they sent Timothy “when we could bear it no longer.” What ought to inspire Christian ministry is a sincere love for God’s people; that’s what we hear from Paul’s pen. He felt such a strong desire for the welfare of these new believers, that he was compelled to act.

Paul regularly felt this way about the new believers in the cities in which he ministered. When he mentions the kinds of afflictions he has had to endure in his own ministry, things like being whipped, beaten, stoned, and shipwrecked, he adds, “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor 11:28).

There is sinful anxiety. But there is also sinful carelessness. And too many who claim to be God’s people express the latter when it comes to how their concern about their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul was certainly not careless. Feeling the weight of their anxiety for the welfare of these new believers, “we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone.” It was dangerous and risky for Paul to break up his team of missionaries. In the ancient world, travel was difficult and dangerous, and if a group did not stay together it would be as vulnerable as those who left to do the traveling. But the decision was made that the safety of the missionaries would take a back seat to finding out how the church was faring in Thessalonica.<sup>9</sup> They acted like true first responders. They sent Timothy.

## **Uncertain Outcome**

And they had no idea how it would all turn out either. Would Timothy make it? Would he return safely to give a report of how these believers were doing? And how were they doing? Would he find these believers holding on to the faith, or would they have given up on Christ and reject Timothy’s ministry to them?

Paul was relieved when Timothy returned with good news (v. 6). But caring for souls comes with an uncertain outcome. Not all who we seek to establish and exhort in the faith will respond well. Some will walk away from the gospel, falling to the temptations of the tempter (v. 5). It is not just a hypothetical; it is a reality.

And sometimes when that happens, we will encounter hostility from those we thought were our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So why even care? Because we can’t help it, can we? If we have seen the beauty of Christ in his gospel, if our own hearts have been won to him by his grace, then it is love that drives us. It is not obligation and duty. Not really. A soldier might speak of his service as doing his “duty” to his

country, but it is a duty only in the sense that he feels obligated by a deep love for his country. Thus, he puts himself on the line out of love for his countrymen.

That's how Christian ministry works. If we have been recipients of the freedom we've found in Christ, then let us take up the duty, the love-fueled duty, of laboring with Christ in Christian ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), [457](#).

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Lang, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964–74), [7:56](#).

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Harvard Divinity School Address," in *American Philosophic Addresses, 1700–1900*, ed. Joseph I. Blau (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), 588–604, cited in Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission: Recovering God's Strategy for Making Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), [10](#).

<sup>4</sup> Horton, *Gospel Commission*, [10-11](#).

<sup>5</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed (Stuttgart, Germany: German Bible Society, 1994), [563](#).

<sup>6</sup> This is the same Greek word (συνεργός) as in 1 Thess 3:2, although the ESV translates it differently.

<sup>7</sup> Georg Bertram, *TDNT*, [7:874](#).

<sup>8</sup> Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), [162](#).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, [158](#).