

May 24, 2020
What FAITH Looks Like
1 Thessalonians 3

In August 1986, I loaded all my worldly possessions into a 1972 VW camper-van and launched out from Vancouver to Wolfville, NS to study theology at Acadia Divinity College. Back in those days, there was no such thing as a cell phone (believe it or not). Or email or the internet (believe it or not). Or even an (affordable) personal computer (believe it or not).

Back then, when you embarked on a cross-country odyssey, you were out of contact with everyone until you reached your destination (there were pay phones, but long-distance charges required a major bank loan). So when we ground up the Coquihalla from Hope to the summit at 20 mph, my parents never knew. And when we lost a clutch in (auspiciously named) Bruce Crossing, Michigan, my parents never knew. When we drove 420 km without a clutch to Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, my parents never knew. Maybe it was just as well.

What parents do, of course, is lie awake at night and worry about their children. From talking with my parents, it seems this was true in the past. I can attest that it is still true in the present. I suspect it will continue to be true in the future. It's what parents do.

"Worry" can mean different things. In Scripture we are told not to be anxious about anything (Jesus says this in Matthew 6:25-34; Paul says it in Philippians 4:6). What Jesus and Paul are talking about when they say "Don't worry about anything" is a toxic anxiety that leads to ulcers, acid reflux, anxiety attacks, and depression. This kind of anxiety stems from a struggle to have faith in and trust God; we take the weight of the world on our own shoulders. Weight we simply cannot bear.

However, when we have responsibility for someone, it is right and good to "worry" about them. He knows the Thessalonians are young in their faith (Paul was only there for 3 weeks!), so, in a healthy way, he is concerned about them. He doesn't want them to fall away from their new-found faith in Jesus. This kind of "worry" is a good thing. It's an expression of our love for those who matter most to us.

Paul "worried" about his friends in this healthy kind of way: *"When we could stand it no longer ... we sent Timothy ... to strengthen and encourage you in your faith..."* (3:2).

What is Paul worried about? *"When I could stand it no longer (yes, Paul says this twice in a row!), I sent Timothy to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain"* (3:5). We have noted repeatedly that Thessalonica is NOT an easy place to follow Jesus. After only 3 weeks, Paul and Silas were forced out by a mob and the first believers had to fly on their own (Acts 17:1-10). Paul is legitimately worried that, given the opposition and suffering they are enduring, they would walk away from Jesus. Following Jesus has made their lives more challenging, not easier, as some would like us to believe.

He doesn't want them to be *"unsettled by these trials, for you know quite well that we are*

destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know” (3:3-4).

And what has happened? *“But”* – always an ominous way to begin – *“But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about **your faith** and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of **your faith** ... How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?” (3:6-9).*

Notice what Paul is excited about? **Their FAITH** (he mentions their faith three times in 3:5-9).

Faith, for Paul, is

- partly about our belief in the central tenets, teachings, and truths of Christian faith – we’re INFORMED. Jesus answers the Old Testament hopes and dreams, is God’s Son, is our Saviour, died and rose from the dead, and is now at the right hand of God.
- Faith is partly about our personal trust in God – we’re FORMED. We personally choose to believe, and before God and other people, we take a stand and identify with Jesus,
- Faith is partly about our continued faithfulness and loyalty – we’re TRANSFORMED. We aim to live faithfully because of our love for God, desire to follow His ways, and be His good news in our world. We live as Jesus would live if He were in our shoes.

Faith – being informed, formed, and transformed by God – is tough. It changes who we are. We hear little voices inside our head (or the louder voices of other people), asking,

- *“Can you really believe the strange truths about Jesus?”*
- *“Can you really trust a God who lets things like this happen?”*
- *“Can you really go on with your love and devotion to Jesus when it would be so much easier – and so much more rewarding (in some ways) – to throw your lot in with the gods of this world?”*

Paul knows the Thessalonians will hear these voices. We all do.

Paul’s friends in Thessalonica have kept the faith. But he knows that more trials, and more trials, and more trials will come. They have met the first challenges and kept the faith. But – annoyingly – there will be more tests. So, Paul prays (3:10) that that they will continue grow in their faith (in all senses – belief, trust, and faithfulness and loyalty), so they hang in there for the long haul. There’s nothing wrong with their faith now. But their faith will have to grow as it faces new and different challenges. Our faith needs to grow, too.

“Maturity,” says Thomas Traherne (1636-1674), *“consists in not losing the past, while fully living in the present, with a prudent awareness of the possibilities of the future.”* The challenges of the past help us become stronger, wiser, more resilient people now. And we look forward to the future with hope, knowing the God who was with us yesterday, is with us today, and will be with us into every tomorrow.

What does faith look like in practice?

Paul lays it out for us as he prays for His friends: *"Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones"* (3:10-13).

Faith is based in the nature and character of God. Faith is all about **WHO** we have faith in: the God, our loving, heavenly Father, who we come to know through Jesus. Twice in these few short lines, Paul draws together God the Father and Jesus the Lord.

The WHO we put our faith in matters. In Paul's society you could put your faith in the Greek/Romans gods like Zeus and Ares, Poseidon and Athena who spent more time fighting among themselves than much else. Or you could put your faith in the Roman emperor, who claimed to be divine. Or you could trust the hopelessness of the Epicureans or the Stoics. It was a world of petty "gods" who promised little and delivered even less.

These days, the gods (the ones we look to for hope and direction, for good news in tough times) – be they the stock market, business leaders, or politicians – are looking pretty bedraggled too. Like the emperor's new clothes, these people promise so much, but deliver so little. In fairness, many are doing the best they possibly can, but they are only human – not godlike – after all. They need our prayers. But we daren't put unfettered faith in them.

Paul wants us to know **WHO** our faith is built upon. Our faith is grounded in God – our Father, Creator, and Sustainer – and Jesus – our Saviour, Redeemer, and ever-present Lord. Paul is inviting us to put our faith – our real faith in this true God. The One who did create the heavens and the earth. The One who did become human and live among us. The One who did die on the cross. The One who did rise triumphantly from the dead on the third day.

This is a God – Father, Son, and the present reality of the Spirit – who can genuinely inform us, form us, and transform us, so we can deal with the real challenges of real life. And it is this God who can help us to live faithfully – to live our faith fully (fully with faith) – with faith fully trusting God – and to live faithfully (with faithful integrity) as the people of God.

Faith means ***your love increases and overflows for each other and for everyone else*** (3:12). Remember, Paul is saying this to people living in a culture where people were abusing them for their faith. Paul is encouraging them to fully live their faith and to live faithfully by loving each other (that's fine) AND everyone else (that's more difficult).

When I was in Lebanon, the amazing witness of the Christian church is that they did just this. First, Christians loved, cared for, and fed Syrian refugees. In the 1970's, the Syrian Army had invaded Lebanon, tortured, raped, and killed thousands of Lebanese. Most Lebanese HATE Syrians. Most Lebanese want nothing to do with Syrian refugees. But the Christians care for them. What's with that? THAT is faith in Jesus.

Second, these Syrian refugees the Christians in Lebanon care for are mostly Moslem. To say the least, Christian-Moslem relations in the Middle East are "difficult" at best. Christians are often brutally persecuted by the Moslem authorities. But in Lebanon, Christians care for Moslem refugees. What's with that? THAT is faith in Jesus.

We don't live in Lebanon. But we can think about our faith means our love can increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else. What little acts of kindness and grace can we do? For "each other" in the church? Great! But also for "everyone else"?

Faith means ***our hearts are strengthened so that we will be blameless and holy*** (3:13). Faith does show itself in how we live. We are formed as people of God and transformed by His Spirit. Through His Spirit at work in us, we live with integrity as the people of God (Paul will get into this more in 1 Thessalonians 4).

I'm always amazed when I read through Scripture (right now I'm in Genesis, working on a reading guide for July) at how UN-blameless and UN-holy so many people are. We may have a romantic idea that "heroes of the faith" – like Noah, Abraham, Jacob, even Moses and David – were blameless and holy people. If we think that, we are showing how little we actually read the Bible. These were NOT saints. Some were absolute scoundrels.

On the one hand, that's encouraging. If an adulterous, murderous rat like David can be described as a "man after God's own heart" and be forgiven, then there's hope for all of us. On the other hand, when these "heroes" fail, they (1) mess up their own lives, (2) badly hurt people around them, and (3) bring God's name and honour into disrepute. Their brokenness is a call to take God's holiness seriously, more seriously than many of them did.

Paul prays our hearts will be strengthened so we will be blameless and holy. Why bother?

- (1) **Inevitably life goes better for us.** God doesn't just give us principles (e.g. the 10 Commandments) for fun. Certainly not to be petty. But because they actually work. God, as our Creator, knows how life works best. It's only wise to listen.
- (2) **We don't hurt the people around us.** When we live with a love that increases and overflows, we treat people well. Everyone's life is made better.
- (3) **We do bring honour to the name of our God and Father and our Lord, Jesus.** Of course, we know how un-blameless and un-holy behaviour is bad for the church and God's glory. The opposite is also true. When we react well, in faith, we hope people notice that and that brings honour to God and His church.

How is God informing me? AM I learning new things? How is God forming and transforming me? How is God inviting me to let my love increase and overflow for each other and everyone else? How am I being invited to be a bit more holy? A bit more blameless?