

## Part 3 - *We Were Comforted Concerning Your Faith*

“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 labor might be in vain. But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and **brought us good news of your faith** and love...**we were comforted concerning 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?**” 1 Thessalonians 3:5-6a, 7b-10

“But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing *mother* cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. ... As you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father *does* his own children.” 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, 11

In the past two newsletters, we looked at Paul’s shepherding process. Although calling it a “process” seems too mechanical for the intense longing Paul had for the Thessalonians.

In this newsletter, I wanted to talk about that same thought--how unmechanical Paul’s whole shepherding process was. He may not have called it a “process” at all. We learn more of his attitude and relationship with the Thessalonians by continuing in those same verses about *faith* and also some verses from the previous chapter.

### **Comforted concerning your faith**

After Paul sends Timothy to find out the Thessalonians’ faith, Timothy brings back good news. Here are Paul’s next few interactions with their faith: he hears of their faith (that they are doing well) and then is *comforted concerning their faith*. This reaction is pretty obvious, since he was burdened to know how the Thessalonians were doing; it makes sense that he’d feel relieved at the good news.

But the phrase *comforted concerning your faith* made me wonder what it takes for someone to feel so affected by someone else’s faith--so affected that Paul could say, “I *live* if you stand fast in the Lord,” as in, “Simply hearing that you are doing well has made me *alive*.” I’ve experienced being joyful or empathetic when someone else takes another step with God, but Paul’s whole spiritual life was affected when he heard the Thessalonians’ faith.

In looking at this close connection between Paul and the Thessalonians, it's hard to ignore the previous chapter, where Paul talks about his first time with the Thessalonians. The verses there describe something extremely unmechanical. Something *familial*.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:7 and 11, Paul describes himself like a nursing mother and a father when he interacts with the Thessalonians. But 2:8 really stood out to me. I believe it is my favorite verse in the whole Bible, and it's hard for me to read or even think about it without being filled with emotion (and often my eyes being filled with tears). To me this verse encapsulates the affection that Paul had for the Thessalonians:

“So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.”

### **Because you had become dear to us**

The Thessalonians had become dear to Paul and his co-laborers. Perhaps Paul and his co-laborers had come to Thessalonica simply to spread the gospel, which is in itself great, but then the Thessalonians caught them. All of a sudden they cared for them deeply and held them near to their hearts. Other versions translate the phrase as “...you had become very dear,” or “...you had become beloved.” The word in Greek for *dear* or *beloved* is *agapétos*, which derives from *agápe*, often used in reference to God's love. (*Agapétos* simply means “loved,” the adjectival version of the verb “to love.” Someone who is *agapétos* is the recipient of *agápē*.) This word is used often by Paul in his letters as a term of endearment (for example, “Greet the beloved Persus” in Rom 16:12), but it is also the same word that the Father used for Jesus: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” This deepens the metaphor of Paul as a father to the Thessalonians. The love he had for them touched the love that also exists between the heavenly Father and His Son.

### **But also our own lives**

What did this result in? “We were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives.” Paul and his co-workers gave the Thessalonians their very *beings*. This is very touching, but it's also very striking. Isn't the gospel enough? Isn't the gospel sufficient already for the Thessalonians? Certainly it is sufficient for their salvation. But Paul went on to say “not only the gospel, but also our own lives.” They began with the gospel, very effective for their salvation, but they found a continuation in deep care that caused them to share even their own lives with the Thessalonians.

I imagine Paul one night making a tent, being in the work-flow and working smoothly. And a Thessalonian comes by asking if they can take a walk together to talk about something on his mind. Paul drops his work, even though he knows if he stops, he will lose that working groove he had been in and make less progress. Or, Paul is in conversation with a few young Thessalonians who are telling him about something they struggle with. He realizes that opening up to them about an uncomfortable or embarrassing moment in his life could help them in their current struggle. Without thinking of his own dignity or reputation, he shares the story with them in hopes that they will benefit from it. He shares his own life with all of them, living among them, making a point to spend time with them. There is no thought of, "I've done my job, I've preached the gospel. Time to move on to the next city." He shares his life. The literal meaning of this word *share* implies to "offer [something] so that a change of owner is produced (Biblehub)." Sharing his life meant losing some of his life--his time, his face, his ownership of what was rightfully his as a human being. Yet, he did it all because then they would have a share in his life, for they had become so beloved to him.

I want to have this kind of life, where my time, my energy, and my dignity aren't something that I hold onto. I want to be someone who shares my life with people. How precious it is that God didn't choose to spread his gospel in a mechanical, stoic way. He chose to spread the gospel through an apostle so filled with love, so affectionate for people, and so involved with them. The gospel was all wrapped up in his life, you could say. It was part of the package. It provided warmth, dearness, and comfort to the whole picture.

After spending time like this with the Thessalonians, of course Paul would feel so strongly for their going on. After being so involved with each other, living life together, having an existence that was not separate, of course their spiritual life would affect his. These verses in 1 Thessalonians reveal a unique side of Paul's ministry--so warm, so human, and so bound together with those he is caring for. It makes me want to be the kind of person who is bound with others, that they could receive, not only the gospel, but also my own life. Then, I will be so affected by their faith, longing to know their faith, and being comforted when I find out they are doing well. May we have this warm of a view regarding our own shepherding.