

# Paul the Apostle's Masterclass in Shepherding

## Part 1 - *When I Could No Longer Endure It*

“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.**” 1 Thessalonians 3:5, 6a, 7b

“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 3:9-10

A few years ago, I studied 1 Thessalonians 3 with some other college students. We noticed that in this chapter, Paul uses the word “faith” several times. He *sends to know the Thessalonians' faith*; Timothy *brings news of their faith*; Paul is *comforted concerning their faith*; and Paul longs to go to them so that he can *perfect what is lacking in their faith*. I remember being struck by Paul's series of interactions with the Thessalonians' faith. First, he sends to know it, is comforted by it, and then wants to perfect it. What do all these interactions mean? Is the order significant? And Paul was caring for the Thessalonians, so can we use this chapter as an example to care for people too?

This year, an interaction I had with someone made me think again of this chapter in 1 Thessalonians. I realized there is a lot to learn here about how Paul took care of the Thessalonians spiritually. When we care for someone else's spiritual life, or their journey with God, the Bible calls it “shepherding” (1 Pet 5:2). The next three or four articles will take apart some of the phrases that Paul used with the Thessalonians and see how each one can be a pattern for us to learn to shepherd others.

First, think about someone who takes care of other people's spiritual lives. What do you imagine? You may picture someone who is able to teach, lead, exhort, and challenge, among other type-A personality verbs. It's true that some people feel inadequate to be a shepherd because they think they don't know enough about the Bible, haven't gone through enough experiences, or just aren't that charismatic. But these verses in 1 Thessalonians show us that a big part of shepherding is simply *wanting to know their faith*.

What's the significance of the word *faith*? Paul could have used the word *effectiveness* or *power*. The Bible uses the word *faith* in a few ways: we are *saved through faith* (Eph 2:8), we have a *measure of faith* from God (Rom 12:3), we should *live by faith* (Gal 2:20, 3:11). The fact that Paul used the word *faith* is precious, because it is something inward, something that touched the Thessalonians' very connection with the Lord. They were saved already, so Paul wasn't wondering about their initial salvation. But he also wasn't *just* wondering about how many activities they did for the Lord, how often they showed up to stuff, or how often they prayed out loud. His use of the word *faith* brings to mind how they were growing in the Lord, growing with one another, the measure of Christ they had, what He has been doing in them, the way they lived with one another. It brings to mind both the inward and the outward. Paul cared to know their very connection with God and with each other.

Why did Paul want to know their faith? Some background in the rest of the letter is helpful to look at. The Thessalonians were in a region with a lot of persecution at the time. They had "received the word in much affliction" (1 Thess. 1:6). After some time had passed, Paul became worried about the status of the faith that had formed in them. When Paul first visited the Thessalonians, he had told them that affliction would happen. He told them that they were even "appointed" to suffer affliction (1 Thess. 3:3-4). Just like what Paul and the others were going through, the Thessalonians were now entering into that kind of life, sharing in the sufferings of Christ. There is something so moving about Paul's desire that the Thessalonians would remain in that path of life, and not be tempted to despair and stray from God. He knows the affliction they are in, because his life is also filled with enduring things for the Lord Jesus. He is familiar with that suffering, but--and perhaps for that very reason--he is desperate, yearning, needing to know how it is affecting them. And finally, *when he could no longer endure it*, he sent to know their faith. He uses the phrase *could no longer endure* twice, once in 3:1 and once in 3:5. The weight of not knowing how they were doing was such a heavy burden. He just had to know.

Have you ever cared about someone so much that your heart yearned to find out how they were doing with the Lord? Maybe they were going through a hard time, maybe they had just gotten rebuked by an older saint, maybe they had just made a decision that could lead them away from the Lord. You know that these kinds of experiences are periods of testing for them, a part of every Christian's life with the Lord, but your heart just aches for them. You want to do everything in your power to find out what's going on inside and to be reassured that they are doing well. That feeling touches the heart that Paul had for the Thessalonians, even the heart that a mother or a father would have for their children (1 Thess. 2:7, 11).

So from these verses, we see that Paul's first reaction to the Thessalonians before he even talks with them, is that he longs to know how they are doing. It's like Step 0. He hasn't even done anything yet

except want to know their connection with the Lord. But his wanting is an unbearable yearning that he feels with his whole being. And even today, if this kind of yearning care is in a friend, no matter how awkward and unsociable that friend thinks they are, that is still more valuable to someone than a dutiful shepherding process that lacks care, no matter how effectively it is carried out. I pray that with everyone I care about, I would have a yearning like Paul to find out what's happening inside their heart; to be so invested that my whole being wants to find out what the Lord is doing in them, especially when some tribulation comes, or when they are in danger of being tempted away. May my shepherding spring from that same feeling of *when I could no longer endure it*.