

Women's Bible Study – Winter/Spring 2009 In Christ Alone

April 22, 2009

Christ Encourages Us Through Others

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

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Good Morning/Evening. We are quickly progressing through the book of 1Thessalonians and nearing the end of our program year for Women's Bible Study. This morning/evening we will finish the rest of chapter two and work our way through chapter three; but first I want to take a few minutes to reorient us to the context of the passage.

Gretchen sent me a lovely note after our Celebration for her 20 years of service to this ministry. In her note, she said, when I walked to the podium that morning and began with a history lesson it sounded so much like what I usually say that for a while she didn't realize that the history lesson was about her. I found that revealing, but accurate. Let's look at a map and a little background.

Context

Paul in his recent travels had been to Philippi, then on through Amphipolis (Am-FIP-uh-luhs) and Apollonia, and then had come to Thessalonica. Once there, as was his usual custom, he went to the Jewish synagogue. On three Sabbath days he reasoned with the people from the scriptures.

Let's pick up the narrative in Acts 17, beginning with verse 3. I realize Michelle read this same passage last week, but I think it is worth reviewing. Acts 17:3 (Paul reasoned with them from the scriptures) explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. ⁴Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. ⁵But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, ⁷and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." ⁸When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. ⁹Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

¹⁰As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness

and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. ¹²Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. ¹³When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. ¹⁴The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. ¹⁵The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. ¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

From this passage we are able to fill in a few more details about the church in Thessalonica. We learn that Paul had spent only three weeks there, preaching and teaching. That is not very much instruction for new believers. Soon, the situation disintegrated into a mob and Paul was forced to flee during the night both for his own safety and for the protection of the believers in the city.

He travels the short distance to Berea accompanied by Silas and Timothy. There, he begins again the process of sharing the gospel in the synagogue. At this point we learn another important piece of information about the believers in Thessalonica, for Paul makes a somewhat unflattering comparison. He says, ¹¹Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Apparently the Berean believers were more familiar with the Scriptures and continually checked Paul's words against them as the ultimate standard of truth.

This peaceful exchange does not continue long because once the troublemakers in Thessalonica get wind of Paul's presence in Berea they arrive on the scene to create yet another disturbance for the gospel. The Berean Believers then escort Paul to the coast. Silas and Timothy stay in Berea. Paul waits for them in Athens, apparently alone.

That is quite a whirlwind of activity. This alone time must have allowed Paul some time to process the recent events. He has had to flee these infant churches after precious little time to ground them in their faith. This is especially true of the Thessalonians. Eventually, Timothy is able to reconnect with Paul in Athens and Paul sends him back to Thessalonica to check on the development of the infant church. Paul does not go himself. His presence would likely set in motion another uprising.

Scripture Passage

Now, set against that context let's read our scripture passage for this morning/evening: 1 Thessalonians Chapter 2 beginning with verse 17.

¹⁷But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.

¹⁸For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us. ¹⁹For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? ²⁰Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

¹ So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. ²We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ³so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. ⁴In 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. ⁵For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.

⁶But 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. ⁷Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. ⁸For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.

⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. ¹¹Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹²May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³May 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.

We will be examining three dimensions of this passage. They are: Investing in Relationships, Enduring Trials, and Facing the Future. An outline is available in your materials.

Investing in Relationships

Let's look first at investing in relationships. The more we study the life of Paul, I think the more real he becomes. When first confronted with Paul as a young child or a new believer, we are sometimes overwhelmed just trying to keep track

of the cast of characters and settings detailed in the narratives. But once we gain a little familiarity with the people and places in his life we can move undistracted from the technical two dimensional details to the richer nuances that really help us to see this multifaceted servant of Christ.

Paul invested in relationships. This is evident by his use of plural pronouns, his use of people's names, and his descriptions of intense feelings toward others. We see all three of these in this short passage. We saw them in Colossians which we just finished studying, and they are present in almost every other New Testament book written by Paul.

Let's look at these three evidences of Paul's investment in relationships. First, notice the many plural pronouns. We see words like we, our, us, ourselves. In addition there are relationship descriptive words like brothers and fellow worker. Second, there is an abundance of personal names. In our passage today/tonight only Timothy is mentioned; however, in other books we gather a virtual catalog of names and relationships. For example, 2 Timothy 4:9-13, 19-21 says:

⁹Do your best to come to me quickly, ¹⁰for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. ¹¹Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. ¹²I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. ¹³When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.

¹⁹Greet Priscilla and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus. ²⁰Erastus stayed in Corinth, and I left Trophimus sick in Miletus. ²¹Do your best to get here before winter. Eubulus greets you, and so do Pudens, Linus, Claudia and all the brothers.

In Romans 16:1-15, (I won't read the whole passage, but rather have you glance at the highlighted names of the screen), Paul mentions 27 individuals. ¹I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. ²I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me. ³Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. ⁴They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. ⁵Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. ⁶Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. ⁷Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. ⁸Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord. ⁹Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. ¹⁰Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. ¹¹Greet Herodion, my relative. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. ¹²Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. ¹³Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. ¹⁴Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them. ¹⁵Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympos and all the saints with them.

Finally, Paul's investment in relationships is evidenced by the intense emotion he uses to describe these relationships. In this passage we have phrases like: torn away from you, intense longing, made every effort to see you, when we could stand it no longer, pleasant memories of us, and long to see you. These are very characteristic of the writings of Paul. There are many similar phrases in his New Testament Writings, for example: 2 Timothy 1:3-5 ³I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. ⁴Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

This is an incredible glimpse into the heart of a great man. He was among the best educated of his time. Jesus Christ himself stepped into his life and stopped him on the Road to Damascus and called him to be an apostle. He was a church planter, an excellent communicator, and author of thirteen books of the New Testament. At first glance he almost seems like the Christian superhero of the 1st Century; but that is only a surface level descriptor. Paul was no lone ranger. He invested in relationships.

Evaluating our Relationships

Few can claim the resume of Paul and yet each of us has opportunities to invest in relationships that strengthen and encourage others in their faith. As we seek to apply Paul's example to our own lives, we need to begin by evaluating our relationships. We should look for quantity and quality.

Do you have at least a few close relationships with others? Who are they? Can you name names? Think through a list of family members, close friends, and other Christian women. Are there individuals that you strengthen and encourage in their faith? Are there individuals you can count on to strengthen and encourage you? Are we trying to live the Christian life outside of the church, outside of a community of believers, or outside of relationships with others? If we are we are making ourselves vulnerable, missing numerous blessings, and failing to pay attention to the biblical models that God has provided.

We also need to evaluate our relationships for quality. What is the condition of your relationships? Mentally run down the previous list of relationships you constructed in your mind a few minutes ago and ask yourself what is the quality of these relationships? Do they reflect the deep qualities of Paul's relationships? Are these relationships a source of joy, encouragement, and spiritual growth?

If our relationships are nearly nonexistent and/or shallow we need to take action to remedy that situation. Even the great apostle Paul invested himself in

relationships. He did not try to walk through the Christian life alone and we shouldn't either.

Why should we invest in relationships?

This whole topic I think begs several questions. One question is, "Why should we invest in relationships?" There are several reasons. First, it is Biblical. Paul clearly demonstrates this model of investing in relationships. Jesus also demonstrated this, remember he had the twelve disciples with whom he was in relationship; and he had Mary, Martha, and Lazarus whose home and companionship were a source of rest and refreshment.

Second, we should invest in relationships because they are beneficial. They strengthen and encourage others in their faith and their journey on this earth. Relationships are beneficial both to those who give and to those that receive. You notice in Paul's case it is sometimes hard to tell the giver from the recipient because the relationships have such a mutual quality. They are a blessing to both parties. Sometimes as women we always want to be the givers; but remember in the body of Christ we must learn to be a receiver too. It is hard for others to build relationships with us if don't ever want to receive.

Third, deep relationships provide a visible portrait of Christ to a watching world. My father died six years ago this past February. At the time, I was very pregnant. I had been able to travel to Kentucky to visit my father every month from August when he received his diagnosis until January. I had intended to make December and the celebration of Christmas my last visit until after the baby was born in February; but as January approached I entered negotiations with my obstetrician for a January trip.

He acquiesced to the trip, but proceeded to caution me about future trips by reminding me of several important details: a) my due date was at the end of February b) in four pregnancies and 10 years I had never actually made it to a due date c) the labors were getting shorter and shorter with each child d) there is not good health care aboard a plane and e) the place I was going to in Kentucky was at least 2 hours away from a major hospital. His parting words were: "You are going to have to decide where you are willing to risk having this baby".

My father died in early February and I made the painful decision not to attend the funeral in Kentucky. My dad and I had said all we needed to say to each other in the preceding months and we talked often on the phone, but it was still hard. At the time Lynn Frutiger was the Women's Bible Study Administrator and when I called to tell her that I would not be going to the funeral in Kentucky, she said, "Jann, I can tell you from personal experience, get the funeral videotaped." So, on her advice, I made the necessary arrangements to have the funeral

videotaped and FedExed to me. A few hours later she called back and said, "One more thing, we have decided that the tape is not something to be viewed alone."

You have to realize I am kind of in a fog, my father has just died, and I am about two weeks from my due date. So as I was processing, she proceeded to set in motion a time when some of the small group leaders from Women's Bible Study could view the tape with me. On the day I arrived to view the tape at church, as I entered the fireside room, I was shocked. Everything was perfectly arranged for a funeral service. There were flowers on several tables and some refreshments. Small group leaders began to arrive, many many of them. Pastor Steer and Gretchen arrived and took their seats. A box of Kleenexes was placed by my seat and the service began.

And as I looked around that room, I thought this is truly what the body of Christ feels like. I don't think any person in that room had ever even met my father and yet there they sat at a memorial service like they had known him all his life. That is what close Christian relationships are all about. They strengthen, they encourage, and they picture for us the love of Christ.

How can we invest in relationships?

Hopefully, I have convinced you that relationships are worth the investment, so, "How can we invest in relationships?" One way is through prayer. Look at how many times Paul talks about praying for the churches.

We can invest in our relationships with prayer. Prayer is not an empty exercise. It is a vital part of relationship building. We need to seek God's assistance in our relationships; especially when our relationships have become strained or distant. We can ask for divine intervention in our relationships. Paul asked for that divine intervention over and over. We can ask God for an opening to share our faith and to soften the hearts of family members or friends. We can pray consistently and earnestly as Paul did for others' spiritual health and growth.

We can also invest in our relationship by mobilizing resources, to strengthen and encourage others. There are many ways to do this, but most require us to learn something about the people we want to serve. Study them. What are their needs? What would minister to them? We can minister by what we say and by what we do.

Finally, we can invest in our relationships by investing time. In our modern society there are many ways methods we can use to communicate with others. We can call them on the phone, send them an e-mail, or send them a text message. If we really want to do something special, we can send them an actual letter in the mail with a stamp.

However, I think there is an irreplaceable need for face to face time. I realize this can be difficult because of the constraints of time, distance, and financial resources—my close family all live in Kentucky. However, isn't it interesting that Paul had all of these issues magnified, especially time and distance. When he wanted to see someone he couldn't just hop in his car or web surf for a good airline sale. And yet, he seemed to put a priority on face to face time with people. I think we should too.

Enduring Trials

Another dimension we see in this passage is Enduring Trials. Paul is very concerned about the church in Thessalonica. He is concerned that they are not mature enough to handle the trials that are part of the Christian life. He of course had instructed them on this aspect of Christianity, but since he was with them such a short time he is concerned about how they will hold up under trials.

Paul had a lot of personal experience with trials. He understood the dangers to the Thessalonians. Jesus said of Paul during his conversion in Acts 9:15 . . . This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Trials come in many forms. There can be a health crisis, unexpected surgeries, accidents, injuries, mysterious symptoms, chronic disease, and frightening diagnoses. Trials can come in the form of relationship difficulties: tension in your marriage, strained communication among adult siblings, difficulties relating to children, divorce, and child custody arrangements. Trials can come in the form of finances: a job loss, a downturn in the economy, credit card debt, and unexpected expenses. Trials can range from nuisances and inconveniences to traumatic life changing experiences.

Commentator H.A. Ironside who preached in the early 1900's said this: "All Christians should expect to suffer afflictions in this world. Yet when trouble and sorrow come, how often Christians wonder if they have made a mistake. They wonder whether God has actually forgiven their sins. They wonder if they are really born again. . . . Do not be discouraged, dear suffering Christians. Do not question your Father's love because you are passing through sorrows or facing disappointing circumstances."¹

Trials are unsettling; but they are part of the Christian life. We are informed of this many times in the scriptures. Paul warns us as he warned the Thessalonians. Jesus warned us in John 16:33 when he was talking to his

¹ Ironside, H.A. [Ironside Commentaries: 1&2 Thessalonians](#). Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, Inc. , 1997. 32.

disciples and said, ³³"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

We should expect trouble. We should expect misunderstanding. We should expect attacks by the enemy. Notice that Paul doesn't just name his friends he also knows the name of his enemy, Satan. Commentator John MacArthur identifies several ways that Satan opposes the kingdom of God, references for each are included in your notes. These are ways "God has allowed Satan to oppose the kingdom of God : the devil tempted Christ (Matt.4:3-10); he opposes the gospel (Matt. 13:19; 2 Cor. 4:4) he performs counterfeit miracles (Ex. 7:11; Acts 8:9-24; 13:8; 2 Thess. 2:9; Rev. 16:14); he seeks to deceive believers (2 Cor. 11:3, 14; Eph. 6:11); he perpetrates lies and murders (1 Kings 22:22; John 8:44); he attacks individual churches (Acts 5:1-11; Rev. 2:9,13,24; 3:9); and he especially attacks spiritual leaders (Job 1:6-2:8; Luke 22:31-32; 2 Cor. 12:7-9; 1 Tim. 3:7)."²

While the understanding of the reality of trials doesn't make them less painful; it does help us to endure them because we are not caught completely unaware and because we understand some of their purpose. 1 Peter 1:6-7 ⁶In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

A few weeks ago I casually asked one of the ladies that attend the morning Women's Bible Study how her week had gone. She said it was the best week of her life and the worst week. I found that most intriguing so I said, "Tell me about it."

She was absolutely bubbling over. She had been reading the book by Evangelist, Bill Fay, called Share Jesus without Fear. Upon the completion of the book she felt an incredible burden for her best friend of 30 years. So, bathed in prayer, and prompted by the Holy Spirit she invited her friend over for coffee. Her friend was a regular attendee of religious services, but she did not have a personal relationship with Jesus. She lovingly shared who Jesus is and how her personal relationship with him had made a huge difference in her life. Through tears she told her friend how heartbroken she was that she did not know this saving faith. She then walked her friend through a series of Bible verses revealing the plan of salvation. Her friend accepted Christ and of course their friendship has deepened in a whole new way.

² MacArthur, John. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1&2 Thessalonians. Chicago: Moody Publishers. 2002. 70.

But then came the trial. She began to read and study about how to develop additional tools to share her faith. She began to think about others with whom she could share her faith. Then for some unexplainable reason the tension in her home escalated, nothing serious just a little sharp word here and there. Then, someone close to her said something negative about her new found enthusiasm for evangelism. In the next few days, although she had never been prone to depression, she described a feeling of gloom that just seemed to weigh her down. She wasn't sure what to make of all of this.

I was so glad she had shared, because I was able to say, "Yes, that is right out of the enemy's playbook. You are a more dangerous Christian now that you are eagerly sharing your faith. The people closest to you probably were unwitting instruments used in the attack. Don't focus your frustration on them, realize the source". Ephesians 6:12 tells us: For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Now, I am not advocating that we go looking for demons behind every tree; however we are foolish if ignore the fact that we have a real enemy. Paul, recognized this and so should we.

Facing the Future with Hope

Finally, in this passage we see an invitation to face the future with hope. Paul is always reminding the believers to keep their focus on their eternal hope. He prays: ²May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³May 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.

It was Paul's prayer that the Thessalonians would so persevere in their faith that on the day that Christ returned they would not be ashamed. And so again as Gretchen reminded us a few weeks ago we see the triad of Faith, Hope, and Love operating. We see the call to genuine love through the investment in our relationships with people rather than things, a faith that is able to endure trials, and a hope that looks to the Blessed Return of Jesus Christ to this earth.

Discussion questions for Christ Encourages Us Through Others - 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

1. Identify some important relationships in your life (consider family, friends, and sisters in Christ).
2. Now, consider your interactions in your relationships over the last week and month, how are you investing in these relationships?" How are you investing in the spiritual health and well-being of those individuals with whom you are in relationship? Are you investing in them with any face time? Is face to face interaction an important component to building relationships? Why or Why Not?
3. The Bible has many references that encourage us to attend to the relationships in our lives. Read together: Hebrews: 10:25. How does this passage encourage us to invest in spiritual relationships?
4. Paul was concerned about the Thessalonians' reaction to trials. What kinds of trials have you endured in the last year?
5. Has anyone encouraged you as you have gone through trials? How? If you have not felt encouraged by anyone as you have gone through those trials can you identify why you did not feel encouraged? Can you do anything to build relationships in which you can be encouraged?
6. The last few verses of 1 Thessalonians 3 are a prayer. Again we see the emphasis on faith, hope, and love. From points brought out in the lecture discuss the importance of this triad and the role of prayer in building relationships.

Study questions for Christ Encourages Us Through Others - 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

1. Read the Passage: 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13.
2. Identify some important relationships in your life (consider family, friends, and sisters in Christ).
3. Now, consider your interactions in your relationships over the last week and month, how are you investing in these relationships?" How are you investing in the spiritual health and well-being of those individuals with whom you are in relationship? Are you investing in them with any face time? Is face-to-face interaction an important component to building relationships? Why or Why Not?
4. Look at a study Bible or a concordance and list some passages that encourage us to attend to the relationships in our lives. (Hint: Consider key words such as encourage, friend, believers).
5. Paul was concerned about the Thessalonians' reaction to trials. What kinds of trials have you endured in the last year?
6. What does the Bible say about trials and persecutions in the life of a Christian. (Hint: look for verses with Key words such as: hardship, trials, suffer, endurance, consider Hebrews 12:4-11).
7. Has anyone encouraged you as you have gone through trials? How? If you have not felt encouraged by anyone as you have gone through those trials can you identify why you did not feel encouraged? Can you do anything to build relationships in which you can be encouraged?
8. The last few verses of 1 Thessalonians 3 are a prayer. Again we see the emphasis on faith, hope, and love. From points brought out in the lecture discuss the importance of this triad and the role of prayer in building relationships.