

# THE CHRISTIAN'S ENCOURAGEMENT DURING TOUGH TIMES

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*By the Book™* A Chapter by  
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## Let's Begin

*The Apostle Paul answered many doctrinal questions the church at Thessalonica had in his first letter. Nevertheless, while questions were answered, all problems were not solved. Correct doctrine remains a foundational plank for healthy body life in a church. Unfortunately, people—even Christian people—remain sinners and consequently do not always put into practice what they routinely preach. Thus, the Apostle Paul perceives the continued struggle the Thessalonian believers experienced and penned a second letter to them.*

*Even more significant, persecution from the outside began to worsen. The increased pressure deadened the believers' courage, and they begin to show signs of spiritual fatigue. Nothing is more destructive to God's church than when both its leaders and members wallow in despair and discouragement. Paul could not allow God's flock to remain beaten, whipped, and depressed.*

*Some Christians seem especially prone to despair when dealing with persecution. It makes one wonder "Why me, Lord?" And, while it is not wrong to ask "Why?" for the believer to become "stuck" as it were on the "Why?" rather than focusing on the "What now, Lord?" reveals the perfect formula for becoming a useless vessel for the Kingdom of God.*

*As we begin our study of chapter one, let's follow the simple outline below:*

- I. The Believer's Spiritual Progress Gives Encouragement (vv. 1-4)**
- II. The Believer's Spiritual Prospect Gives Encouragement (vv. 5-10)**
- III. The Believer's Spiritual Potential Gives Encouragement (vv. 11-12)**

## I. The Believer's Spiritual Progress Gives Encouragement (vv. 1-4)

The Apostle opens his second letter similarly to his other correspondence, "Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 1-2). Both Silas and Timothy were his companions in ministry and, therefore he includes them in the greeting. Every good leader will always recognize the contributions others make to his or her success. Leaders are not selfish or concerned that credit comes only to them. Indeed they fully understand the gifts of others made possible their own success. Hence, Paul makes sure the Thessalonians respect his apostolic team for their contributions to ministry.

In addition, Paul summons praise for what God was doing in their lives. He continues, "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth; So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure" (vv. 3-4; cp. 1 Thess. 1:3). Encouragement comes to Christians as they make spiritual progress in three particular spheres: faith, love, and hope.

First, Paul considers a growing faith. He exhorts the Thessalonians because their "faith groweth exceedingly." Biblical faith is not stagnant like a pond with a trickling inlet but no outlet. Instead faith is like a cool mountain spring; it moves with fresh water continually. Our faith should grow in every area of life. Trust in God should "aboundeth" more and more, or, as the Apostle says, faith "grows exceedingly."

One is surely right to wonder just how faith grows. Paul tells us clearly, though understandably we may not like his answer. How does faith abound?



Paul answers, through “persecution and tribulations that ye endure.” More often than not, we feel our difficulties are simply meant to humble us. And there is no doubt humility is a virtue which comes to us as a result of troubles. However, another virtue no less significant for living the Christian life—a virtue which comes as a result of persecution—is a vibrant, abounding faith.

For example, think of faith as one would think of muscle. Muscles must be exercised to grow stronger. Weight training is used as a means to grow muscles. Through the tearing of tissue and increased pressure upon them, muscles grow in size and strength. Similarly, our faith grows more and more through challenges and pressures which come in the form of tribulation and persecution! Even the smallest trials prepare us for bigger ones. According to Scripture, trials should not stifle one’s faith. Rather trials should cause faith to bud; that is, to branch blossoms in fresh beauty and thriving vigor. Growing faith gives us more and more reason to trust.

### Reflection Connection

*Reflect on those means you pursue which make your faith increase in power and scope. Be prepared to share with the entire study group.*

Second, Paul considers an abounding love. Faith is the non-negotiable root of our salvation in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, love is undeniable fruit of salvation in Jesus Christ. Hence, the Apostle speaks in terms of a love which “abounds.” Another distinction we may observe is the invisibility of our faith. Faith cannot be seen. Faith is an inward trust in the Person of Jesus Christ. However, love is outwardly-oriented. As a flood irrigates the parched land so love is written on every page of our life through the actions we perform. Indeed in the end, Biblical love is an action verb; it is doing. Paul reminds us, “God demonstrated His love toward us...[in that]...Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). For Him, love was action! For us, love is no less action.

When we are having hard times, the tendency too often is to become overly self-focused. Instead, our goal should be to start reaching out to other people. It has been said the best cure for loneliness or depression is to get interested in reaching others for Jesus. Therefore, each Christian should be a fresh fountain of love rather than a stagnant cistern of selfishness. Our love should flood everyone around (cp. John 7:39).

Third, Paul considers an enduring hope. The term “endure” means “to bear up under.” It carries the idea of keep on keeping on. One option the Apostle Paul rarely, if ever, pursued was to run from problems he faced the way too many Christians do. Trials build character into life. Hope is character’s fuel to keep it advancing forward. Mushrooms

spring up overnight. Yet it takes years to grow a mighty oak tree. Hope looks to the oak, not the mushroom for its model. The Thessalonians needed help concerning their hope. Hope had been shaken by the false teachings being sown. Nothing kills hope any more quickly than unbiblical teachings. Paul remedied their theological sickness by pumping into their spiritual veins the medicine of God’s Word.

*Each Christian should be a fresh fountain of love rather than a stagnant cistern of selfishness.*



When troubles come, faith should reach upward to the Person of Jesus Christ. Faith focused in any other direction is misplaced faith, faith that is unbiblical. In addition, love reaches outward toward other people made in God's image. While the Christian has a special relationship with God's people, the church, Christians must nonetheless love all people both saved and unsaved. And, the most visible action of love a believer may do for an unbeliever is to share the good news of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Finally, hope reaches onward, looking for God to do more in the future than He is now performing.

## II. The Believer's Spiritual Prospect Gives Encouragement (vv. 5-10)

Not only does our *spiritual progress* contribute to our encouragement, but also our *spiritual prospect* is most encouraging as well. What is our spiritual prospect? One way to understand our prospect is to think of it in terms of a *promise* to believers to hold in the midst of troubles. One fairly familiar promise many Christians quote, for example, when facing difficult circumstances is "I can do all things through Christ which strengthen me" (Phil. 4:14). Prospective promises like the above, advance encouragement to a whole new level in our lives. How? By anticipating two powerful realities working in the believer's life.

First, the righteousness of God is a powerful reality. Paul writes, "Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer: Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you" (vv. 5-6). The "token" which Paul says is "manifest" is nothing short of evidence; that is, proof positive God is at work in one's life.

*There is a righteous God working behind the scenes.*

In addition, Paul is saying that, in the future, present sufferings are viewed as having a beneficial purpose in life. In other words, suffering in many ways is God working out His righteous purpose for us. Now, it is certainly not obvious to us at the time. For example, it was anything but obvious to Job what was happening to him (Job 1-3). But behind the scenes God was working in Job's life. Times exist when the only way believers can keep their sanity is to embrace a higher purpose in it all. There is a righteous God working behind scenes (cp. Psa. 27:13).

### Reflection Connection

*Do you count suffering as an act of anticipation for God to work? Explain. What are some ways which will develop a more positive anticipation which suffering is said to bring?*

Pertaining to persecution, let us not forget God's coming judgment of both the unsaved in general and those who persecute Christians in particular. God is just. One day heaven will balance the scales of justice. Tables will turn on the wicked. Or, as the Apostle phrases it, "it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you" (v. 6). A solid principle of justice lies at the basis of our belief in a moral universe. On a smaller level, we may ask, "What kind of town allows criminals to run wild?" Similarly, we could ask on a much larger scale, "What kind of universe would it be where God did not punish sin?" While it remains forever true God is love, it stands no less eternally true He is also holy.



*Second, the revelation of the Lord Jesus is a powerful reality.* Paul again writes, “And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day” (vv. 7-10).

The term “revealed” has the idea of uncovering what was hidden. Jesus Christ has been hidden from view for over two thousand years. While it is true He has been present in His church, it remains undeniable He has been seated at the right hand of the Father since He ascended to heaven (Acts 1:7-9). One coming day, however, the world will see Him in majestic descent from heaven—“from heaven, with angels, in fire.” What a scene! When He is revealed, recompense for sinners will be certain.

*His coming will mean an administration of unwavering justice.*

Note Paul refers to “vengeance,” not revenge. His coming will mean an administration of unwavering justice. Indeed an infliction of full justice for criminals will rule the day. And, just who are these cosmic criminals? Paul is clear in his identification. They are those who “know not God,” those who “obey not the gospel.” Every believer reads this with sadness. The strongest words possible describe the coming judgment of God—“everlasting destruction...from presence of Lord.” Separation from God is what makes hell, hell. Heaven is the presence of God; hell is the absence of God.

On the other hand, while unsaved sinners receive “everlasting destruction” saved saints will receive everlasting (v. 10). The term “rest” was used when bow strings on an instrument were relaxed. Tension, pressure, and persecution have all passed away (cp. Heb. 4:9; 1 Pet. 1:12).

### III. The Believer’s Spiritual Potential Gives Encouragement (vv. 11-12)

After Paul offers the Thessalonians encouragement to face their difficulties with a renewed sense of faith, love, and hope, he offers a prayer for their future *potential*. The final verses read, “Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of *this* calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of *his* goodness, and the work of faith with power: That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 11-12).

In this prayer, the Apostle offers two particular petitions. First, Paul prays for *future realization* (v. 11). The Apostle’s concern focused on the spiritual status of the Thessalonians—“count worthy.” Paul’s prayer is nothing short of a call to salvation. Not that one is “worthy” to be saved. Instead the meaning is to live life worthy of the salvation which God has freely given.

#### Reflection Connection

*How can Christians discern between living a “worthy” life on the one hand and not accepting “good works” as a means to heaven on the other? Is there a conflict? Explain.*





### Golden Greek Nugget

Paul makes use of the most horrific words in his vocabulary to speak of the coming judgment upon the unbelieving world, “Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power” (v. 9). The Greek term translated “destruction” is *olethros*, and means “to destroy,” or “to ruin.” And, as one lexicon noted, the “fundamental thought is not annihilation” of the person; instead the meaning focuses on “unavoidable distress and torment.” Even more frightful, the duration of the distress and torment is “everlasting.”

Paul further speaks of the “good pleasure of His goodness.” Every desire which goodness prompts in the Christian’s inner desire should result in outward activity which is similarly good. How is this goodness accomplished? From Paul’s perspective, the answer is easy—“word of faith with power.” The believer’s motives, actions, and life are driven singularly by God’s power.

Second, Paul prays for *future glorification* (v. 12). The ultimate goal of every believer is “Christ glorified in you.” When the universe looks at Christians, the impression should be, here is what Jesus can do. Hence, believers should so live that glory may be brought to the name of God, so others see what a wonderful Savior Jesus Christ is by the way we live. Christians will be glorified in Him because of who He is. And, the believer’s identification remains eternally with Him.

### Wrap Up

*If a person is saved, the best is yet to come! On the other hand, an unsaved person faces the righteous judgment of a holy God. No one will escape meeting God one day. And, the Gospel is very clear: Obey the Gospel and be saved. Perhaps there are those in the study group who have never thought seriously about their spiritual life. Today is the perfect time to begin. More importantly, today is the day Jesus Christ is calling out to every person, “Come. Follow Me.” If you will simply humble your heart, admitting your sin, and then turning to the only Savior, Jesus Christ, trusting Him to save you, He will. Today. Why not turn to Him today?*

