

# TO SUPPLY WHAT IS LACKING IN YOUR FAITH

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

Key Verse: 3:10

**“Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.”**

In 2:1-16, Paul defended his gospel ministry against false accusations: he shared his motive and reminded the Thessalonians of how he lived among them like a nursing mother and a father. At the same time, when they accepted the gospel, not as a human word but as the word of God, there was a great work of God. In today's passage, Paul defends himself against another false accusation: after leaving abruptly, he did not return for quite a while. His adversaries implied that Paul was not concerned about the new believers. Paul was aware that behind the attack of these human adversaries, Satan was working to destroy the faith of the Thessalonians. Paul's main concern was not just keeping a good relationship with them, but that they stand firm in faith. Sometimes we think that relationships with our children or Bible students are most important. Or we think that making the best program or good organization are most important. But in truth, faith is most important. We can see this faith expressed through Paul's heart and Paul's prayer. Let's learn why faith is so important.

**First, Paul's heart (2:17-3:5).** In 2:17-20, Paul described how much he loved the Thessalonians and why he could not return to them. 2:17a says, **“But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought).”** This verse reveals Paul's strong feelings for the Thessalonians. Here, the verb “orphaned” literally means “torn away and deprived.” When they were forced to be separated, Paul felt like a parent whose children had been taken away. Paul's heart was broken and constantly aching for them. Though he could not see them, he thought of them unceasingly. There is a saying, “Out of sight, out of mind.” But that does not describe Paul. Out of intense longing he made every effort to see them (17b). Paul wanted to come to them again and again but Satan blocked the way (18). We don't know exactly how Satan blocked Paul. Perhaps it was through the opposition of hostile Jews. But the fact was that Satan was hindering Paul's ministry.

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Paul was always aware of who his real enemy was. As he says, our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil—Satan and his allies (Eph 6:12). They are like the spiritual mafia: sneaky, merciless, cruel, and ready to attack. In the parable of the sower, Jesus compared Satan to a bird that comes and eats the seeds planted by the farmer (Mk 4:15b). Preaching the word of God is like planting seeds of faith. Satan hinders this effort to keep people from believing the word of God. Whenever we engage in the ministry of God's word we should be aware that Satan works to hinder it. But Satan's power is limited. He could not separate Paul and the Thessalonians in thought. Nor could he take away the hope and joy that filled Paul's heart for them. Paul said, **“For 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? Indeed, you are our glory and joy”** (19-20).

Here the phrase, **“in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes,”** is very meaningful. Paul always had in his heart the assurance of Jesus' coming again. At that time, Jesus will bring his final victory over the enemy and it will be a time of joy and glory for his people. We will all stand in his awesome presence. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords! At that very moment, what will really matter? Money? Social status? Fame? Achievements? None of these! What will matter is our faith. What will matter are the people whom Jesus saved through our faith. They can be our hope, our joy, and our glory. It does not mean this can be our credit for righteousness. It does mean we can participate in Jesus' glory because we have participated in his suffering by serving his sheep. So, God's people under our care are very precious and a source of joy for us. Let me ask you, “What is your joy? What is your hope? What is your glory?” Are your Bible students a source of joy, or a burden to you?

Though Satan blocked his way to visit the Thessalonians, Paul never gave up. There is a saying that when God closes a door, he opens a window. When Paul prayed for them constantly, he found a window. Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica. To do this, Paul was left alone in Athens (3:1-2). It was not easy for him during spiritual warfare. But Paul was willing to do anything to help them. He wanted Timothy to strengthen and encourage them in their faith so they would not be unsettled by the trials they were facing (3a). Here we can learn that a personal visit is the best way to encourage others. But when it is not possible, we can ask someone else to go. But that

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someone should be reliable and able to strengthen and encourage faith. Timothy was such a person. Paul speaks of him as a brother and coworker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ.

In verses 3b-5 we find that the Thessalonians were going through trials due to persecution. But Paul did not express human sympathy. Instead, he said, **“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”** (3b-4). Here we learn that to go through persecution and trial is part of God's purpose for believers. Paul said in Philippians 1:29, **“It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.”** Jesus taught why we are persecuted: **“If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you”** (Jn 15:19). At first, Peter really wanted to avoid suffering from persecution. But after accepting the gospel, he said, **“Rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed”** (1Pe 4:13). Some people emphasize, “If you believe the gospel, you will be rich, successful, and healthy. Your life will be trouble free.” This is half true. Jesus promised that in this present age, those who sacrifice for the gospel will receive 100 times as much as they gave, and in the age to come eternal life. But Jesus also promised that persecution will come (Mk 10:29-30). Paul knew that participating in Christ's suffering was part of the gospel. So, after being stoned and left for dead near Lystra, he got up and entered the city again. He encouraged all the believers, **“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God”** (Ac 14:22).

Why does God allow trials and persecution? It is for our good. How does God use them? It is human nature to find our comfort zone in this world and try to live a comfortable life. This is a false hope that causes us to lose our spiritual fervor. Through persecution, God takes away our false hopes, stirs us out of our comfort zone, and purifies our faith. God wants us to put our hope in Jesus alone. Then we can have real joy and peace. Furthermore, we can carry out our life purpose to share the gospel with people perishing in their sins. To participate in Jesus' sufferings is at the core of the gospel message. Paul had taught this truth to the Thessalonians again and again even though they were young. Then, when it happened, they were not surprised.

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Rather, they could know the meaning of it, endure it, and take deeper root in the gospel. No one likes to hear about suffering. But gospel workers must share this truth so that believers can stand firm in faith when trial comes.

Though Paul had laid a good foundation, he was troubled at the thought of Satan's work among them. He refers to Satan as "the tempter." Paul recognized that Satan's temptation is sweet and powerful. He was afraid that through temptation the Thessalonians would lose their faith and his labor might have been in vain (5). That is why he sent Timothy to find out about their faith. Here we can see that though Paul's body was in Corinth, his heart was in Thessalonica, and he was doing everything he could to strengthen their faith. What kind of faith is expressed through your heart?

**Second, Paul's prayer (3:6-13).** In verse 6, Timothy had just come back to Paul, bringing good news: the Thessalonians were standing firm in faith and love. They always had pleasant memories of Paul and longed to see him, just as he longed to see them. When he heard this good news, he was very much encouraged. He said, **"In all our distress and persecution we were encouraged by you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord"** (7-8). When they stood firm in their faith, Paul was alive and joyful and thankful. He said, **"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"** (9). And he prayed for them.

Let's read verse 10. **"Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith."** This verse tells us of another way to fight against the devil's hindrance. It is prayer. This prayer was not just habitual or official. It came out of his love for the Thessalonian believers. His prayer was earnest. To our human eyes, prayer seems to be the expression of wishful thinking, just talking in the air. But in truth, prayer is the most powerful weapon to destroy the strongholds of Satan. When we pray, Satan shudders. It is because God hears and answers prayer. John says, **"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him"** (1Jn 5:14-15).

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In this mighty power of prayer, what did Paul ask? Paul prayed that he may visit them to supply what was lacking in their faith. Even though their faith was pure and genuine, it needed to grow into maturity. Paul mentions some of the ways in which their faith needed to grow in chapters 4-5. Paul really wanted to visit them in person to provide what was lacking so they could grow and bear fruit. Paul not only told them he was praying for them, he actually prayed for them in his letter. Verses 11-13 contain his prayer topics. **First, he prays:** “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you” (11). **Second, he prays:** “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you” (12). Paul acknowledged that they had God’s love in their hearts. But love must always increase. We can always love more. Christ’s love is multidimensional and limitless. When this love overflows among Jesus’ people, the world can see that they are his disciples. It is the most powerful testimony. **Third, he prays:** “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” (13).

The phrase “**in the presence of our Lord Jesus [God]**” is repeated three times in this passage (2:19; 3:9,13). Two times the phrase “**when he [our Lord Jesus] comes**” is added (2:19; 3:13). This shows us that Paul was always aware of the presence of God and of Jesus’ second coming. Whatever he did, wherever he went, whether people saw him or not, he sensed God’s presence and lived before God. He was always alert to Jesus’ coming. This is the motive for living a blameless and holy life. It is not easy for us to live with integrity in this corrupted world. But when we are aware of God’s presence and Jesus’ second coming, we can do so. And we are ready to meet him anytime—whether he comes to us, or we go to him.

In today’s passage, we find the word “**faith**” five times. Verse 2: “**...to strengthen and encourage you in your faith.**” Verse 5: “I sent to find out **about your faith.**” Verse 6: “**Timothy...has brought good news about your faith.**...” Verse 7: “**We were encouraged about you because of your faith.**” Verse 10: “**to supply what is lacking in your faith.**” Paul’s main concern was not having a good relationship with them, but their faith. He wanted to strengthen and encourage their faith. He worried about them losing faith. He was alive when they stood firm in faith. He wanted to supply what

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was lacking in their faith. This faith was in Jesus. Why was he so focused on their faith? Why is faith in Jesus so important? Let's think about this.

**First of all, faith in Jesus gives us salvation.** The most important issue for any human being is to be saved from sin and death. The Bible shows us very clearly the way of salvation. 2 Timothy 3:15 says, **"...the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus...."** Believing in Jesus is the only way of salvation (Jn 14:6; Ac 4:12). To believe in Jesus, or not believe in Jesus is a serious matter with eternal consequences. Mark 16:16 says, **"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."** This is why faith in Jesus is so important. It is a matter of eternal life or eternal condemnation.

**Secondly, faith in Jesus gives us true victory.** While we are living on earth, we face many challenging issues: threats to our health, relational conflicts, financial hardship, the stress of modern life, raising children, and cultural and generational barriers, not to mention peer pressure and persecution. This is real life. How can we overcome? There may be many ways. But what is most important is to have faith in Jesus deep in our hearts. When we have faith in Jesus, God gives us strength and wisdom to turn our adverse situation into God's deep grace and fruitful victory. 1 John 5:4b-5 say, **"This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God."** This victory is not just visible and circumstantial. It comes from the invisible power of faith in Jesus. It may not be evident outwardly at first, but later it will bear fruit. For example, a Pakistani Muslim Habib and his wife believed in Jesus and were baptized. For a Muslim to convert to Christ and testify about him is against the law in that country. Nevertheless, while they were having a family gathering on the flat roof of a house, Habib boldly shared the gospel. His family members were so angry that they tried to kill him by throwing him off the roof. Fortunately, he landed on a sand pile. His arm and some ribs were broken, but he was able to get up and escape with his wife and children. It must have been very painful to be persecuted like this. He could have been discouraged and given up. But he never gave up and persevered, by faith. Several months later, he returned to that area to share the gospel in a secret place. To his surprise, his mother and father and some

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relatives came to the meeting. They had repented and accepted Jesus because of his testimony. This is the victory that came through faith in Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

**Finally, faith in Jesus enables us to bear good fruit.** Faith in Jesus is not static; it is dynamic. It grows and bears fruit because it has life (Col 1:6). Every human being will bear some kind of fruit, it is inevitable. But will it be good fruit or bad fruit? This is the issue for each of us. If we live naturally, without faith in Jesus, we will surely bear bad fruit: the guilt, shame and brokenness that come from sexual immorality, the self-destructive bondage that comes from addictions, and things like hatred, jealousy, fits of rage, and the like. But if we have faith in Jesus, he gives us the Holy Spirit, and as we walk by the Spirit, we can bear good fruit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23a). This makes our lives meaningful and happy.

In a word, having faith in Jesus is everything. That is why Paul focused on the faith of the Thessalonians. We should also be most concerned about having faith in Jesus and planting faith in our Bible students and children. How can we do this? Most of all, it is through Bible study. Romans 10:17 says, **“Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”** Jesus always taught the word of God. Paul also preached the gospel in season and out of season (2Ti 4:2). And he prayed and sent letters. Let’s pray that we may do this also.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gospelherald.com/articles/69678/20170221/pakistani-christian-thrown-off-roof-after-sharing-gospel-with-muslim-family-but-then-something-amazing-happened.htm>