TO SUPPLY WHAT IS LACKING IN YOUR FAITH

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

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 the last lesson, we could see Paul’s deep affection for the Thessalonians in his defence against the false accusation that Paul’s failure to return to Thessalonica was out of his lack of true concern for the church. That outstanding, affectionate heart of Paul for them was the reflection of God’s loving heart for his people. Paul testified that God’s flock of sheep in Thessalonica would be his hope, joy, crown, and glory at the time of the coming of the Lord Jesus. At this, we could think of what really matters in the view of our Lord Jesus’ coming. That is the salvation of our own souls and of other souls through us. This will be truly a glorious thing before him. Chapters 1-3 in 1 Thessalonians are the introduction of this book, and chapters 4-5 are the main part. Today’s passage is the last section of this long introduction, which includes sending Timothy to Thessalonica and his good report and Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians. In this study, we can further see Paul’s deep affection for them, praying for their spiritual maturity. This message has two parts, “to strengthen you in your faith” and “to supply what is lacking in your faith.”

**First, “to strengthen you in your faith” (1-6).** Paul says in verse 1, “So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens.” Even as for Paul, there was a time for him and his gospel coworkers to stand no longer. He wrote it again in verse 5, “For this reason, when I could stand it no longer.” Yet, he did not complain to God, being fatalistic or despairing. He did what he thought best, probably when he was not sure of God’s leading 100%.

Then in verse 2 he says, “We 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.” Paul recognized Timothy as God’s fellow worker in speaking the gospel of Christ, so Timothy could be his gospel coworker. He also said to the Corinthian believers in 1 Corinthians 4:17, “For this reason I am sending to you Timothy…” and to Philippians in Philippians 2:19, “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon…” How good it is to have such a gospel coworker!

And here in verse 2, the purpose of sending Timothy was to strengthen and encourage them in their faith. Paul’s deep concern for them was their faith. Surely Paul knew that they would have many problems when they had to be left all by themselves. However, as for Paul their faith in the Lord Jesus was his deepest concern, for faith is everything in life. He wanted to strengthen and encourage them in their faith. In today’s passage the word “faith” is written 5 times (3:2, 5, 6, 7, 10). When a father brought to Jesus his son with an evil spirit, he said to Jesus, “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” Then Jesus responded, “‘If you can’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for him who believes” (Mk 9:23). Before healing the terribly sick son of the father, Jesus first helped the father’s faith. To Jesus the father’s faith problem was more serious than the son’s problem of being controlled by an evil spirit. At this rebuke of Jesus, the father was not disheartened but immediately exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief” (Mk 9:24). This was really a humble cry in his desperateness before Jesus the Son of God. Jesus blessed this humbly cry and healed the son completely. The father must have learned the importance of faith in life, taking Jesus’ word in his heart, “Everything is possible for him who believes.” 1 John 5:4-5 says, “This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”

Then verse 3 says, “so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them.” Christians are destined for trials and afflictions. What a destiny! All believers expect blessings from God, not troubles and trials in life. Thessalonians were young Christians, but Paul made clear that they were destined for trials. Philippians 1:29 says, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.” Actually, we are to know that sufferings are higher blessings of God. For through trials and sufferings in life we can turn to God and rely on him and learn faith.

Paul continues in verse 4, “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.” It is somewhat surprizing that from the beginning of their faith Paul told them about persecution. He says in 2 Timothy 3:12, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” The reason they would be persecuted is this: Jesus said in John 15:19, “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.”

Then Paul says in verse 5, “For 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.” Here we see clearly that at the time of persecution the devil can work powerfully to make God’s people fail and fall through his various kinds of strategies of temptation, and Paul also feared it. However, we can defeat the devil through our prayer and faith. Certainly Paul must have prayed a lot for them, specifically that God may strengthen their faith. Later, we see that they were standing firm in the Lord (10).

Jesus said to Peter at the last supper in Luke 22:31, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Acts 12:5 says, “So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.” The government of Jerusalem put Peter in prison to end the gospel work, but the church did not yield to the evil plan of the devil but prayed earnestly. Then miraculously God rescued Peter by sending an angel. Acts 12:7 says, “Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up, ‘Quick, get up!’ he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.” The angel guided Peter to the end to come out of the prison building. And the gospel work continued. God worked more than that. King Herod died. Acts 12:23 says, “…an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.” The Lord rescues and also kills. In Hannah’s prayer it is written, “The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up” (Sa 2:6). Also, Daniel 2:21 says, “He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them.”

Truly faith is victory as Hymn Song says, “On every hand the foe we find Drawn up in dread array. Let tents of ease be left behind, And on ward to the fray. Salvation’s helmet on each head, With truth all girt about, The earth shall tremble ‘neath our tread, and echo with our shout. Faith is the victory! Faith is the victory! O glorious victory That overcomes the world!”

**Second, “to supply what is lacking in your faith” (7-13).** Now Paul says in verse 6, “But 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.” Here we see that Paul wrote this epistle right after receiving Timothy’s good report about the Thessalonian believers. Timothy brought good news about their faith and love. Their faith was sound and strong, and their love was true. Their faith and love were proved. John Calvin said, “Those two words are the sum of godliness.” They were godly and also loyal with pleasant memories and longing to see those who served them in God.

Then Paul continues in verses 7-9, “Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 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?” We see that Paul was greatly encouraged by the faith of the Thessalonians that they were standing firm in the Lord, being so thankful to God. We see more of the preciousness of faith. The Thessalonians were young Christians, but they could be a great encouragement to Paul and his gospel coworkers through their faith. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 16:13, “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith…” While talking about the signs of the end of the age, Jesus said, “but he who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Mt 24:13; Mk 13:13; Lk 21:19).

On one occasion a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came to Jesus. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. What a difficult life! She could have been bittern and angry towards all the doctors and the society and given up her life. But she was not. In that pitiful and despairing situation, she heard about Jesus. Then faith produced in her. Strengthening her feeble arms and weak knees, she mingled with a large crowd who followed Jesus. Then she came forward from the crowd and came up behind Jesus still in the crowd and touched his cloak. It was an act of her faith, for she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from bleeding. Jesus was very much pleased with her faith and let her come in front of the crowd and confess her faith while she just wanted to go away with no one’s notice still in her shame. Jesus not only healed her physically but also spiritually, saying, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.” (Mk 5:25-34).

On another occasion, a Syrophoenician woman whose daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came to Jesus and fell at his feet, while Jesus wanted to keep his location in secret only with his disciples. All mothers want their daughters to grow beautifully and safely. But when her daughter was possessed by an evil spirit, how great her heart pain must have been as a mother! She must have lost the joy of living. However, she heard about Jesus and came to him in that secret and remote place. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. What a precious faith! But Jesus rejected her request, treating her even like a dog, saying, “First, let the children eat all they want!, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” What an unexpected and aggressive treatment! It could be a moment her last hope was being shattered. In such a moment she responded, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She recognized herself as a Gentile the Jews treated as dog, who was unworthy of God’s blessing. In that humble acknowledgement of herself, her faith was shining more with an amazing wisdom. Jesus was amazed at her response and blessed her saying, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.” In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus said, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted” (Mt 15:28). She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Truly, faith is precious.

Paul wrote about this Thessalonian church in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, “And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.” What a beautiful, generous, and rich church the Thessalonian church was, who in their extreme poverty could give because of their faith!

Then Paul says in verses 10-13, “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 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.” Here we see that Paul prays for Thessalonians, using an optative mood which expresses a wish. He prays for their spiritual maturity, growing in faith, love and hope.

Yes, in chapter one, Paul commended for their work of faith, labour of love and endurance of hope in their Lord Jesus Christ. Now he prays for their growth. In the phrase “supply what is lacking in your faith” the word “supply” is “perfect” in KJV and “complete” in NASB.” Paul also said in Colossians 1:28, “We proclaim him, administering and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.” He also said in 2 Corinthians 13:9, “…our prayer is for your perfection” and 13:11, “Aim for perfection…” What a goal in serving God’s flock of sheep! Hebrews 12:2 says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scoring its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Firstly, he prays that their faith be perfected, surely keeping their good attitude toward the word of God, such an attitude that when they received the word of God, they accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in them wo believe. This is as Peter said in 1 Peter 2:2, “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.” Also, certainly Paul wanted them to be thoroughly equipped with the word of God as 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for ever good work.”

Concerning love, he prays, “your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.” He says in 4:9-10, “Now about our brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for your yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.” According to Jesus two greatest commandments are loving God wholeheartedly and loving my neighbour as myself. There is a clear order in love. Loving God comes first. We cannot truly love our fellow Christians without loving God. Loving our brothers is to be the expression of our love for God in obedience to him. This is what we learned in 1 John. Specifically, 1 John 5:2 says, “This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands.” It does not mean that when we love God, we can love one another automatically. We are to know that loving one another is our Lord Jesus’ command in John 13:34, “A new command I give you: Love one anther. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” Loving our brothers and sisters in Christ involves denying oneself and taking up each one’s own cross, following the Lord Christ Jesus personally. And when we love one another in obedience to Jesus’ command, we can love the people of the world for the salvation of their souls. True believers have this order of love. Paul prays that their love may increase and overflow. We learn more about prayer concerning in Philippians 1:9-10, “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.” Love requires knowledge, deep insight, discernment and purity on top of sacrificial serving.

Then Paul 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.” “Strengthen your hearts” is a unique expression in the Bible written here. We all know the importance of one’s heart. Proverbs 4:23 says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” So, how important it is to strengthen one’s heart. Heart is the seat of motive, purpose, desire, thought.

But one’s heart can be broken, damaged, or deadened or calloused. How can our hearts be strengthened? Paul prays for this, “May the Lord strengthen your hearts.” Yet, it is notable to see Paul’s prayer. The prayer, “May God strengthen your hearts”, comes after his prayer for their faith and love. Heart strengthening is related to faith and love, faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and loving him. Apart from faith and love our hearts cannot be truly strengthened. When our hearts are strengthened, we can be strong, firm, stable, unmovable in time of temptation.

Then Paul says in this prayer, “…so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father.” How can one be blameless and holy before God? It is when our hearts are strengthened through our faith and love. When we keep our faith in Christ Jesus and love God and love others, we become more and more selfless and so become blameless and holy. When we are full of self, sinful selfish self, we become the target of one blame after another. God is calling us to blameless living, holy living, purity of life.

Finally, Paul wanted the Thessalonians to be blames and holy in the presence of God the Father when the Lord Jesus comes with his holy ones. In this way Paul continually planted the hope of our Lord Jesus’ coming in their hearts. John says in 1 John 3:2-3, “…when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.” It is Paul's desire, furthermore God’s desire for believers to be pure at the coming of the Lord Jesus in the future glory, and that should motivate us now.

May we grow as men of faith, love and hope! Particularly, may God strengthen us in our faith to the completion of our faith so that we can not only overcome our own problems but also be used by God for his glorious kingdom work.