

“Finding Strength” (1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13)(8.30.20)

1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:13 (NIV84)

¹⁷ But, 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 [face to face]. ¹⁸ For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us. ¹⁹ 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? ²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

3 So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. ² 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, ³ so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. 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. 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.

Timothy’s Encouraging Report

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. ⁷ Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. ⁸ For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. ⁹ 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? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again [face to face] and supply what is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³ 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.

The word of God for the people of God.

Title: **“Finding Strength”**

LET US PRAY.

INTRODUCTION:

Here is an email our bishop sent out a few days ago:

Dear Friends in Christ,

In our nation, wildfires burn in California, a powerful hurricane swept through the Caribbean and came ashore on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Texas, racial issues continue as a police officer shot another African American, Jacob Blake, which gave rise to new demonstrations and even riots and a white teenager killing protesters, a presidential campaign is driving wedges in communities, homes and even the church, and more than 180,000 people have died from COVID-19.

Our pain deepens, our anger burns and our fear increases.

Some describe these times through the end times in the book of Revelation, others call forth texts from the prophets to let justice roll down like water and others like Jesus, weep over the city of Jerusalem.

Where is the Good News of Jesus Christ? Where is the God news?

UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief) was planning and mobilizing for hurricane relief even before the hurricane rolled ashore.

United Methodist churches in the Western Jurisdiction are sheltering and caring for those affected by the fires.

A GNJ team working with more than 100 leaders have created a plan, A Journey of Hope to integrate our mission and the work of ending the sin of racism in GNJ and working to create greater inclusion in all of our churches.

GNJ churches are distributing 20,000 meals a month to people who have been affected by the economic crisis caused by COVID-19.

GNJ has said that in the midst of our differences, we will find a way forward together and that we may not think alike, yet we will love alike.

The Good News doesn't quiet the bad news, but it helps us find a way through the bad news. The Good News is 2 Timothy 4:7, *I have fought the good fight...I have kept the faith*. The Good News is hope that fuels justice, faces into the stiff winds, sees people as people and not as their political affiliations, undertakes the hard work to end the sin of racism, and finds a way forward when others cannot find a way.

Friends in Christ, we live for another day, but in this day we mourn with those who have lost, we walk with those who experience injustice, we help those who are hurt, we love those who feel unloved.

I call each of you to be bearers of the Good News and to pray for the healing of our land. I call upon you in these most difficult economic times to give generously when the storms of life rage, to work to understand one another, to learn about inclusion and equity, to stand up against racism and to stand with those who are victims of hate, storms, fires, and pandemics. Let us all this weekend pray for our nation and the people around the world.

Keep the faith!

Bishop John Schol
United Methodists of Greater New Jersey

BODY:

Yes, these times call for strength. As I read through the Bible and through the pages of human history, I find few periods when this wasn't true. You might find a generation in a particular time and place where peace, shalom, was prominent; but those times are the exception and not the rule.

Many of us are of an age where we look back a generation with nostalgia. This is a somewhat misguided viewpoint as they were also the times of the sexual revolution, and wars, and civil unrest. We point to those days and celebrate how much healthier our churches appeared to be; but I want you to hear what the popular preacher, A.W. Tozer said about those times:

"It is my judgment that too many of us go to church on Sunday for the same reason that a child climbs into its mother's arms after a fall or a bump or a fright—the child wants consolation!

We have fallen upon times when religion is mostly for consolation—for we are in the grip of the cult of peace. We want to relax and have the great God Almighty pat our heads and comfort us with peace of mind, peace of heart, peace of soul. This has become religion!

According to my Bible, there should be a people of God, a people called of God and subjected to a spiritual experience by God. Then they are to learn to walk in the way of Truth and the way of the Scripture, producing the righteous fruit of the child of God no matter what world conditions may be.

But there is a great misunderstanding among us. Too many tend to think that we get the flower and the fragrance and the fruit of the Spirit by some kind of magical shortcut, instead of by cultivation. Meanwhile, our neighbors are waiting to see the likeness of Christ in our daily lives!"

But, here I stand today wanting to console you and explain to you how to find strength according to our present scripture. The key issue is that it is not a passive desire to be kept safe, but an active strength. This strength is found in hope. This strength is sustained in joy. This strength grows in the exercising of faith. All this is possible through a framework of fellowship.

Do not be naïve about the reality of what is really going on in our society. The Devil is at work. Paul says that Satan hindered or stopped us. Paul says that he feared the Tempter had led the Thessalonians to abandon their new found faith. There was no doubt in Paul's mind that the Enemy openly opposed the kingdom effort to plant churches and bring people to a faith in Jesus. He had experienced this opposition first hand.

Prior to planting the church in Thessalonica, Paul and Silas planted a house church in Philippi. When Paul cast a future-telling demon out of a slave girl, her owners were outraged. Acts 16: ²²The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. ²³ After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴ Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Upon being escorted out of Philippi, they went to Thessalonica where there was a Jewish synagogue. Some responded positively to the gospel message (and a church was established), but some did not. Acts 17: ⁵ But 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, ⁷ and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." ⁸ When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. ⁹ Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

From there, they went to Berea. The Bereans are described as noble for their belief in the good news and daily examination of the Scriptures. But the troublemakers in Thessalonica followed Paul, Silas, and Timothy to Berea. They agitated crowds and stirred them up. That is how Paul, Silas, and Timothy ended up in Athens, from where this encouraging letter is sent.

Paul didn't want the Thessalonians to be discouraged by the trials and persecution. "Remember when I was with you and taught you that following Jesus is not easy. Affliction is to be expected." Ostensibly, it was people that persecuted them, but those people were instruments of Satan, who opposes God and anything that builds the kingdom of God.

I love what Warren Wiersbe says, "The trials and testings that come to our lives as Christians are not accidents—they are *appointments*. Faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted. God tries our faith, not to destroy it, but to develop it. "

Five times in today's scripture, Paul mentions the Thessalonians' faith. It may seem that it is circular logic, but their faith gives them strength and that strength upholds their faith. The same can be said of the elements that constitute their faith: joy, hope, love, and fellowship.

Think about it like this. I am learning to play the baritone ukulele. The more I practice, the more I enjoy it. The more I enjoy it the more eager I am to practice and become more skilled. So, it is not circular logic but perfectly reasonable to say our faith gives us strength and that strength enables us to live out our faith.

In the past two weeks, we have established that they were a spiritual family. The relationship is spoken of in terms of brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers. Even though they are physically separated, Paul assures them that they are still together in heart.

Notice the intensity of Paul's expression of longing for them. At the end of chapter two, he says they "endeavored, more eagerly, and with great desire to see them face to face." At the end of chapter three, this strong sentiment is repeated. "We pray – most earnestly, night and day, to see you face to face."

In the middle, is the report of Timothy how both the fledgling church and the church planters mutually long to see each other. That feeling of connection and the good news that the Thessalonians continue in their faith and love is sustaining Paul and friends in their distress and affliction. In other words, they are being strengthened by the knowledge and experience of fellowship.

Now, the New International Version omits the phrase "face to face," while the majority of the major English translations include it. I believe it expresses a more personal and intimate "seeing;" a closer bond. And, with our current pandemic measures, it jumps off the page for me.

The question of whether churches should be meeting in person or not is a hot topic. There are many Christians on both sides of the argument. Churches are being fined by state authorities. Churches are going to court to fight against the restrictions.

In this scripture, we cannot miss the criticality of fellowship. This is why I see the Enemy involved in this pandemic. Even when we gather like we are doing, we don't see each other face to face because of masks. Now, I try to keep a mask in my car, at my house, and in my church office so that I always have one with me. I also try to respect those in authority over me and follow the safe distancing guidelines. BUT, as I wrestled with this scripture this week, maybe it is time to move some secular boundaries.

This feeling of fellowship and family produces a joy, even in trials and tribulations. Paul clearly calls the Thessalonians his joy. And, he feels joy on their behalf before God. Being thankful to God contributes to our strength. It orients our thinking rightly. All good gifts come from our heavenly Father. There is a correlation between our gratitude and our joy.

What is their basis of hope? At the end of chapter two and chapter three the second coming, the return of Jesus is lifted up. As a matter of fact, Jesus' return is mentioned in all five chapters. Here in chapter three, we are told Jesus will come with ALL His saints. This is the big "C" church made up of the communion of all Christians. Yes, I remind you that all Christians are called saints repeatedly in scripture. And, this overlaps the fellowship theme.

In the trials, tribulations, afflictions, distress, and persecution, we have the strength to keep our heads lifted up. Your hope will keep your focus on the heavens and not on the fires and dire forecasts. Look up, because the angels promised that Jesus would return the way he ascended to the right hand of the Father; on the clouds.

Jesus promises: Matthew 24:30–31 (ESV)

“³⁰ Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

Timothy, as a coworker in the gospel of Christ, was sent to establish, strengthen and exhort the Thessalonians in their faith. So, faithful pastoral leadership strengthens the foundations of the believers; but, more than that, it beckons them towards growth.

In these verses, Paul commends the Thessalonians for their love. In the closing verses, we find this intense prayer of Paul on behalf of his beloved spiritual children. “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another AND FOR ALL.” This is an active supernatural love whose source is God, for God is love. Love conquers all things. Even hate. Even persecution. The result of this love are hearts that are blameless and holy; not before some arbitrary human standard, but before our God and Father.

Do not miss that this prayer caps this chapter of compassion and care for the Thessalonians. Prayer is key. Paul says they are praying continuously and they are pouring themselves out on behalf of their spiritual children. Why? To supply whatever happens to be lacking in their faith. For each of us, it might be a different lack, but earnest and constant prayer will strengthen us.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus told his disciples in John 16:33 (ESV) “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” In Paul's day,

he made it very clear to expect temptation and opposition from Satan. This has never changed. When we look at our current culture, we cannot miss the truth that the things of God are under attack.

We live in a fallen and broken world. Much of the evil that is perpetrated does not directly target Christians, but all suffer because of it. The existence of evil and suffering in the world is used by some atheists as an excuse for denying the existence of God. Some Christians, through the work of the Tempter, lose their faith after experiencing a tragedy in their family.

King Solomon wrote for us, "A cord of three strands is not easily broken." Our connection to God is a strong cord. It is made of faith, hope, and love. We have faith and trust in the saving work of Jesus on the cross. We have the hope in Jesus' promised second coming. We have a love of God, a love in Christian fellowship, and a love for all. There are supporting strands of joy and gratitude. There is a protective sheath around this strong cord of connection that we call prayer. A faithful leader teaches us and exhorts us to maintain this strong connection to our God.

Where are you finding your strength? The eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the whole earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him. ([2 Chronicles 16:9](#)) Today, right now, make sure you are fully committed; and, God will strengthen you.

Amen and amen. Let us pray.