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1 THESSALONIANS 3:6-13

Series: Real Christians in Challenging Times

Well every week we study the Bible verse by verse and we are now in this passage in 1 Thessalonians. We're studying 1 Thessalonians verse by verse. What that means is that we're looking at the actual words of the passage. We're going to look at those words because we believe that the actual words themselves are inspired by God. Not just the ideas, but the words are inspired by God. And then those words are in a context. So that's why we look at the phrases, and then we look at the sentences, then we look at the paragraphs, then we look at the book. Because in the midst of that context we understand more about what God is saying in those specific words. But we also do more than that. We look at the geographical and historical and cultural background. What we try to do, and I say this regularly, let's put ourselves into the story. Because when we put ourselves in the story then we get to imagine what it was like for Jesus to walk on the earth or Moses to lead the people out of Egypt. We're in the story because we want to find out what's going on there. We want to take the principles out of the passage and we want to apply them to ourselves in a way that allows us to live our lives the way they did back then.

It's just so amazing to me how the common experiences of the people in the Bible match ours in our experience today. I'm so glad that God has put us in the book of 1 Thessalonians just for this period of time in our lives. You're going to see in this passage connections that are so obvious that it just makes our lives feel more like Paul's life as he is in Athens.

So let's look at the passage now. And let me read it to you and then we're going to dig into these verses. This is 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13. *But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you. There's this social distancing for Paul here and he longs to see them. For this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face (not just over Zoom or not just over Facebook Live, but face to face) and supply what is lacking in your faith?*

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

This is a very meaningful passage. Let me just bring you up to speed into where we are in the story. You see Paul was left alone, he says, in Athens. That word ‘alone’ kind of rings to us as we find ourselves alone. He was left alone in Athens and he sent Timothy to Thessalonica. He sent him there in order to check on the Thessalonians to find out how their faith was doing. After all, he’s only taught here for three weeks. The church had just begun and he left. His leadership was no longer involved there. What happened to them? Did they all just fall away or did they continue to grow? But the reality is God’s church grows. It grows even though we may not be gathering together at a certain time and we may not know what’s going on in each other’s lives sometimes. But God is working. And that’s what happens in this situation.

So Timothy comes back to Paul. And when he comes back to Paul, Paul is just really excited to hear the message because Timothy comes back and says, “Yes, they are doing well. They are growing in their faith and they’re growing in their love.”

In fact let me point out, let’s go back to the passage here again. Look at verse 6 with me. I’ve highlighted a bunch of words here because, again, it’s the words that are going to give us the applications we need. I highlighted the word *faith*. That’s our word *pistis*. You’ve seen that in previous passages. You can take your book that you have and this book and open it up and circle that word *pistis* and draw a line across. That’s the word *faith*. It’ll match the other times you’ve done that in the same chapter as well. But it’s not just the word *faith*. Circle the word *love* there because it’s mentioned a couple times in the passage as well. So it’s about their faith and their love that he’s seeing that he is excited about and that Timothy is reporting about. It’s their faith and their love that he’s remembering.

It says that *they always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you*. I can feel that in Paul’s life. The longing to see other people. I just think about our own fellowship. I long to see John and Maria Snee. I just love them. To see them at church on Sunday is just really fun. I long to see Jack who is so faithful every week to organize the ushers and to help set up. I just long to see him. I feel it inside of my heart. I long to see Matt and Cole Dammann. Cole just loves the Lord so much and his faith is inspiring and that’s what it’s talking about in this passage. I long to see Cindy Innocenzi who’s had this shoulder surgery last year and was doing really well (I assume you still are, Cindy). But when I say, “Cindy how are you doing?” it’s different than on the phone because she says, “Oh my shoulder’s doing fine.” It’s this kind of face to face content that I long for and I can experience what Paul is saying in these verses that he longs to see them and we long to see you.

He continues on, notice in verse 7, and he says – *For this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith*. It’s that same word again that he’s talking about, *faith*, but what is it that’s happening here? See Paul had his own set of problems, didn’t he? He had his own trials. He was persecuted, he was tossed out of cities, he was being condemned for his faith. That’s the kind of suffering and affliction that Paul was experiencing. But we all have our own set of challenges and problems in our lives. Sometimes those challenges and problems can weigh us down. It’s been said that if all of us were to take our problems and put them on the table and kind of look around and decide which ones we’d want to take, we’d probably want to take our own back. But the reality is they still weigh on us. That the

challenges that we experience to not see our friends, a young person might be having a challenge because they wish they could be at school, and they're just not experiencing that.

Notice what it says there in the passage. It says that Paul was comforted. He was *comforted about you through your faith*. Even in the midst of his distress and his affliction. Because what happens, see, is Paul had his own faith that he's growing in and experiencing. And when he hears what's going on in the lives of those other people, something happened to his own faith. It inspires him, it encourages him.

I know that my faith is encouraged on Sunday mornings even before we start the teaching or any of the other things that are going on because I get to connect with the other believers at church. I get to know and hear what's happening in Mike Dammann's life. And when I do then that's inspiring for me. It's encouraging to hear how he's working out his faith. Or Rich DeLisi is working out his faith. It's those stories that take place that are inspiring and then we grow from those.

Last week we listened to Don listen to his story about how God is growing him and his personal faith. That led to a discussion between Ed Otte and myself. Ed has gone through this virus and during the ten days or two weeks that he was involved in that, he was shooting me a text every day and I was watching what was going on. And boy, he was having a hard time. He had a hard time with this whole virus, but God did some good things inside of his heart. He wants to share. I'd like to have him share sometime on a Sunday morning about what God has done in his life and was doing during that time to make the scriptures come alive and to strengthen his own personal relationship with God.

That's what's happening in this passage when Paul says, "Look, I've got my own afflictions. I've got my own distress," are the words he's using. "And I've been comforted because of your faith and your connection to God." So there's this receiving that comes to Paul as the result of what's happening in this passage. You know sometimes we start thinking about our own lives and how challenging our lives are.

Let me read this to you that Carrie, my wife, gave to me. "Just imagine if you were born in 1900. When you're 14 years old World War I starts and ends when you're 18. Twenty-two million people perish in that war. Later in that year a Spanish Flu epidemic hits the planet and runs until you're 20 years old. Fifty million people die from it in those two years. Yes, 50 million. When you're 29 the Great Depression begins. Unemployment hits 25%. The world gross domestic product drops 27% and that runs until you're 33. The country near collapses under the world economy. The Dust Bowl cripples farm rows across the Midwest, causing massive food shortages. When you turn 39 World War II starts. You're not even over the hill yet. And don't even try to catch your breath. On your 41st year, the United States is fully pulled into World War II. Between your 39th and 45th birthday, 75 million people perish in the war. At 50 years old, the Korean War starts. Five million people perish. At 55, the Vietnam War begins and doesn't end for 20 years. Four million people perish in that conflict."

You've just got to think about those things. If you were born in 1995 and you're 25 years old now and you say, "My grandparents they didn't really understand electronics, they didn't

understand the challenges we have at school and the difficulties we have.” I’ve got to tell you, our grandparents and great-grandparents had some real struggles in their lives.

In fact I can identify with what Paul is saying in this passage. Just look at it again. He’s saying look, he’s saying in all our distress and affliction, we’ve been comforted about you through your faith. It’s the faith of the other people there that encourages Paul in the midst of his struggle. It’s on the beautiful things about being part of God’s church, His kingdom. We’re encouraged by the faith of other people and it becomes this real blessing for us. That’s what’s being said in those verses.

Let’s continue on. Notice verse 8 it says – *For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.* When he says *we live*, he says that’s our vitality. We are really living now.

I think about probably one of the greatest things that I enjoy is when someone comes to know the Lord and we get to see them just in their infancy as a Christian. But right alongside of that is other people growing in their faith. When I hear stories about how you’re growing in your faith and how you’re standing fast and firm in the Lord, that is really encouraging and that’s when Paul says and *now we really live*. We have this vitality that we’re enjoying because of God, what you’ve done for us and how you’ve demonstrated that grace in other people’s lives, and we receive that in our own hearts.

Now he continues on in verse 9 by entering into a prayer. He says – *For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God.* Of course there’s this joy that we share that we feel for the sake of other people. Yes, they’re growing in their faith. That’s so cool. It’s just this understanding that there’s something taking place in someone else’s relationship with the Lord that’s inspiring to us and it produces this joy. We come before God and we say, “God, thank you for what you’re doing in that person’s life.” And that experience is just so enriching for us. It makes us want to live for Christ all the more.

If we go back to the passage in verse 10 he continues by saying – *as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?* Now this is interesting because in the first part of the passage remember he says you guys are growing in your faith. Timothy’s telling me that and it’s inspiring me in the midst of my distress and affliction. Now he’s saying I want to come to you and I want to see you face to face. And when I come and see you face to face then something really good is going to happen. I am going to be able to (the passage says) *supply what is lacking in your faith*. It’s this mutual exchange of inspiration that takes place. That I’m going to supply what is lacking in your faith. Maybe he’s going to do some teaching. Maybe he’s going to tell this story. But something that happens in the midst of that interaction supplies what is lacking in our faith. If there’s something lacking in your faith, one of the key things is listen to what’s going on in the lives of your brothers and sisters. And when you do, God does something important in our lives and He grows us in a way that’s strong and powerful.

Well now we go into this next verse, verse 11 which begins by saying – *Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you.* What he’s saying is God, open the door for us to come back together. I can identify with that. God’s going to open the door for us to

come back together. I don't know how He's going to do that or where or when, but it's not the governor who decides, ultimately, when we get back together. Some churches are already opening in different places. They can do that. We're going to be able to get back together because God will open the door for that. So we are praying that God would do that, just like Paul is praying that we can see each other face to face. So that we can get together for what reason? Look back at the verse again. It says in verse 12 – *and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you.*

Now let me just go to another slide there. Let's take this last part. I just want to identify those words *increase and abound in love*. I want to talk about those for a moment. You can circle those. The word *love* is *agapé*. And what he's saying is he wants them to be able to increase and abound in that love. The idea of increase is the idea to grow in quantity. That's what he's saying. Just going to grow in quantity here. When the number kind of increases, that's this word increase. So there's something quantitatively that happens in our love that makes it bigger.

And then it says to abound. The word *abound* is an interesting word there. It has to do with leftovers. In fact when Jesus told the disciples after the feeding of the five thousand to go around and pick up all of the abound, all of the leftovers, all of the food that is left over from the people because the food was more than the people needed. It's the abounding that comes. Sometimes what God does is He fills us up so much that we have more love than what our heart needs.

So notice what it does. It says our love for one another and spills over then into this *love for all, as we do for you*. There's something about this love that's pretty powerful. That God makes bigger and bigger inside of us as result of our faith growing more and more that does something so big that it abounds. It spills over. It increases. It's like this tank of love that gets so full.

Notice what it does in the passage. It says in verse 13 – *so that* (in other words here's the conclusion) *he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father*. Now there is this holiness that God is calling us to.

When you see the word *holiness*, I don't want you to think it's unattainable. I want you to know it's there, it's out there, and it's for you, and God is moving us more towards holiness. But what is holiness? Is holiness the adherence to a bunch of rules? I don't think so. I think holiness is this demonstration of love that just expounds more and more in our lives. I think that's what Jesus said when He was asked of the Pharisees – *What is the greatest commandment?* And Jesus' response to that was not let's find which rule is the most important to obey. But He says let me summarize this all for you in that *you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you love your neighbor as yourself*. It's this love that's going to grow so much, and that's what holiness is. The holiness is really prompted by the love and it's going to change the way we are.

So I'm thinking about this idea of this increase and abound in love that the passage says, that it talks about this holiness that exists there. And as I do, I come to this kind of picture in my own mind of this spiritual love tank that each one of us has.

Now before I get too far here, this idea of the love tank is an idea that comes from Gary Chapman. He says in his famous book *The Five Love Languages* that every person has a love tank. So if we can identify what language it is that fills that love tank, then we can increase what's inside for them. We can satisfy them emotionally and he gives five different ways that takes place.

It's words of affirmation. Some people just thrive on the words of affirmation that makes them feel loved. Others it's quality time. Putting things aside and focusing on them. That quality time just meets their need and fills up their emotional tank. The third one is receiving gift. So when someone receives gifts, it just does something inside and meets some internal needs that they have. A fourth one is acts of service, when you actually do something to serve someone and that builds their emotional love tank. And the last one is physical touch. When you do that in some cases that just really fills that emotional tank.

Now I would suggest that there's not only an emotional love tank, as Gary Chapman so eloquently describe, but there is a spiritual love tank that each one of us has. That's what I'm drawing attention to in this diagram. A spiritual love tank that only God can fill.

Now I'm going to take another passage of scripture written by Paul, actually 1 Thessalonians is his first book. His second book is Galatians. And so in Galatians 5:16-26 it talks about this love tank spiritual love tank. He talks about the Spirit versus the flesh. *Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.*

If we look at the Spirit side, when our spiritual love tank gets filled up by the Lord or we're allowing the Spirit to fill us up then what happens is we have these qualities on the right-hand side. That we're filled. We experience these nine different things are mentioned that comes from the Spirit.

Just think about these. When you're doing well spiritually, these are the things that happen to you. These are the changes you experience. *You feel more in love.* The same word used in our passage, *agapé*. You feel more *joy*, the same word used in our passage in 1 Thessalonians. You feel more *peace*. Instead of focusing in on the anxiety or anger you might have, you experience more peace because God is flooding you with that. You have more *patience* with the people you interact with. You're able to take time with them and that patience just grows inside of you. You also have more *kindness*. You're just kind with people. Your response to them is you're not as short or quick in your remark. You don't get so annoyed with people because you're Spirit-led, Spirit-filled in those moments. This what holiness is all about. The next word is *goodness*. That this goodness is just something we're focusing in on. It's this goodness that allows us to focus in on what's good instead of what's bad. There's so much bad around us that the goodness is what we focus in on because we are filled with the Holy Spirit of God. As we continue on, we see that there's this *faithfulness* there in the passage. *Faithfulness* is the same word that's used in our passage, *pistis*, that comes when our spiritual love tank is full. We just have this faith that grows. *Gentleness*. This idea to be really gentle with someone. Especially I suspect when they're annoying. And lastly this idea of *self-control*. This ability to control our urges or emotions.

Well that's what it means when the dial is set over there on being Spirit-filled. We just got to think for a moment because Paul uses the word in our passage (we'll go back to it in a moment in 1 Thessalonians 3) *strengthen your heart*. I think what he's saying is the same thing here. Be filled with the Spirit, strengthen your heart, have your faith strong. When that happens, good things happen. It just grows in us. Abounding. It's increasing in number. So the love tank just gets increased all the more.

But if your love tank gets drained then let's go over here to the other side. And you see there are things that happens he says in the passage in Galatians 5 when your love tank from God is not filled up and bad things happen. *Sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery*. Debauchery is this idea that you're focused on yourself and when you're focused on yourself you're kind of enjoying pleasures and you don't want to think about anybody else. It's all about self. So if you're involved in your movie or you're playing your video game and you're just thinking about yourself, that can turn into debauchery. *Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord*. Now the word *discord* notice it's in three different ways it's described there. You have *discord* then a few down it's *dissensions and factions*, all this idea of tension and separating people that takes place. *Division*. When you emphasize the difference instead of the unity that takes place in relationships. That's what happens when your spiritual love tank is on the fleshly side. It's low, then you experience those things. *Jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition*. Become so self-focused. *Dissensions and factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like*.

I put in the words there *and the like* because that's what the passage says. But I didn't exclude them because if your sin isn't listed in the passage there in Galatians 5, you can fit it in there *and the like*. Because we all have a tendency to move towards sin in our lives when we are not following what the Lord wants us to follow. We make mistakes. We just don't have our heart filled up the way it should be filled up.

What does it mean to be over there on the Spirit side? How do we move ourselves into that place where God is able to do something significant in our spirit and to grow us in that spiritual way? So we're spiritual instead of carnal or fleshly. That's part of the discussion we had in our Bible study on Wednesday night. How do you get over to the spiritual side? If you find out that those indicators are coming on the fleshly side, what do you do to get over there? We listed some things like prayer, and Bible study, gathering together and being encouraged by the brothers and sisters. Those things are good. But I appreciate what Lorraine said. She's a theologian and what she said was this: You know sometimes we just have to sit in the presence of God. Sometimes it's just the idea, "God, just fill me with your Spirit. I just want to sit in your presence." And as we sit in God's presence He moves us away from the fleshly side of things to the Spirit side. Yes we need God's word to infuse us with truth, but sometimes we just sit in the very presence of God to be Spirit-filled, to be holy.

Let's go back to our passage in 1 Thessalonians 3. Because it says at the end – *so that he may establish your heart* (strengthen you is what he's saying) *blameless in holiness before our God and Father*. What does it mean, that holiness? What does that look like? It's this great ability to move toward the Lord, to follow His direction. That we live in the Spirit. That we have our spiritual love tank abounding and increasing as verse 12 says. And when that happens, God does some amazing things.

I think this verse 13 because it says they are *so that*, this is like the conclusion of all the things we looked at already. You're going to experience all of these things of interacting in your faith and you're going to experience the building up of other people's faith, and your faith is going to be increased, as the passage says, and that's going to establish your heart. We all need that. We need our hearts established before God and that grows us in a way that helps us to move in and around our lives in a way that is just honoring to the Lord and brings joy to other people and increase their faith. It's all part of being someone who's following Jesus Christ.

One more part of the passage. Just look at the last phrase. It says – *at the coming of the Lord Jesus with all his saints*. Jesus Christ is coming again. And when He does it may be sooner than we think. But when He comes again He's going to take us up to heaven. Those who have trusted Him as their Lord and Savior, He's going to take us to be in this special place. All the saints, all those people we haven't seen in a while that we've been socially distanced from (not because of a virus but just we've been away from them), we're going to see them again at that point.

Now this chapter 3 is the introduction to chapter 4. There are three ideas that are shared in chapter 4 and we are going to expand on those in the coming weeks. There's this idea of love that's going to be developed a little bit more. The idea of holiness is going to be developed a little bit more. And then the coming of Jesus Christ. We're going to talk about the second coming of Christ as we get to the end of chapter 4. You're going to want to be part of that study. You just want to grow and allow God to speak to you in these areas.

But here we are in this passage seeing how they're all tied together and bringing them to this place where we're strengthening our hearts or God is strengthening our hearts. It's interesting to see that in the passage, let me just take you back into verse 12, notice it says – *The Lord make you increase and abound in your love*. It's God who is doing this. So that's why I say that it's a spiritual love tank that only God can fill. That's what the passage is talking about. God's the one who is doing that inside the heart.

So I'm going to pray for us. If you have not given yourself over to the Lord, you don't know what it means to have this personal dynamic relationship with Him, now's the time you can do it. And if you do, shoot me an email, scott@takejesushome.com and I'll send you Lesson 1 in a Bible study that will further allow you to go into God's word and understand what that personal relationship with Jesus Christ is all about.

Let's pray together.

[PRAYER] So Father, we do ask you to strengthen our hearts, to grow us. Give us more love. Give us more holiness. Teach us how to rely on your Spirit and to trust you. Lord, we want to serve you. We want to have a faith that's growing. Thank you that we can learn from each other and experience that growth in each other's lives. Lord, do something powerful in our lives this week. Show us your power. Grow our faith. In Jesus' name, amen.