

Paul's Unspoken Unselfishness

“Wherefore, when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left behind at Athens alone; and sent Timothy, our brother and God’s minister in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith, that no man be moved by these afflictions; for yourselves know that hereunto we are appointed. For verily, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we are to suffer affliction, even as it came to pass and ye know” (1 Thess. 3:1-4).

Paul’s unselfishness and great concern for Thessalonians is seen in many settings of both epistles to them, but no place is it more evident than in these verses. “When we could no longer forbear” tells us that Paul’s great anxiousness reached a boiling point to the degree that although Timothy could not have been with him for more than a few days, Paul dispatched him back to Thessalonica to inquire of the Thessalonians: to establish and comfort them.

When Paul’s hasty departure from Berea was necessitated by violent Jews from Thessalonica, brethren in Berea seemed to have accompanied him to Athens, and his instructions to them were that Titus and Timothy were to come to him with all speed (Acts 17:18). Luke does not record Silas and Timothy actually meeting him there; the inspired record states they came to him in Corinth (Acts 18:5). However, Luke’s omission does not mean that neither of them came to him in Athens, nor does it contradict the obvious implication of 1 Thess. 3:2 that at least Timothy had made it there, for the implication is clear that when Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica and remained alone behind in Athens, that Timothy was sent from Athens; all of which serves to remind us that Acts is not nor was it intended to be a detailed account of the whole of the events he referenced. Furthermore, we appreciate the value of other accounts of the same event remembering with David, “The sum of thy word is truth” (Psa. 119:160).

Consider Paul’s situation in Athens. He was alone. The city was wholly given to idolatry (Acts 17:16). While there was a synagogue and he reasoned there just as he did in every synagogue that gave him liberty to do so, the implication is that the Jews were indifferent to any message he might have spoken. He was friendless and had no way of knowing that his persecutors from Thessalonica had not followed him to Athens.

Yet, despite all this, the apostle’s concern was Thessalonica. They were not far removed from paganism. They were suffering persecutions for having newly embraced a despised religion. Had they despaired? Had they relapsed back to what they earlier had practiced? Paul knew that even if they were unmoved by their afflictions, they needed to be established; strengthened; they needed to be comforted and Timothy was the one who do just that for he was God’s minister, and in Paul’s closing days Paul wanted him to be with him for the comfort his presence would give him: “Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me: For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia” (2 Tim. 4:9-10).

Afflictions will come: "Hereunto were ye appointed" is the way Paul put it. Jesus assured His disciples that although standing with Him might mean loss of our parents, children, and family, yet they would gain fathers, mothers, and children to replace them. But persecutions would come with that (Mt. 10:30). Jesus revealed that one very close to Him would betray Him: "He that eateth my bread hath lifted up his heel against me" (Jn. 13:18; cp. Ps. 41:9). That in the world we will have tribulation (Jn. 16:33). Paul reminded brethren everywhere that through much tribulation we must enter into the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

Yet Paul wanted the Thessalonians to know that however severe their persecutions were, heaven was worth the enduring of them: "I reckon that the suffering of this present time is not worthy to be compared with the glories that shall be revealed" (Rom. 8:18). And, we have God's assurance that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthened me" (Phil. 4:13). This is the assurance of God's care for us; His assurance that He will not allow us to be tempted before our ability to stand (1 Cor. 10:13); and, the knowledge that he was their father in the faith had denied himself the comforting presence of Timothy in his own trials and persecutions in order to comfort and strengthen them by his words and presence should have comforted them and gave them power to stand in the hour of trial they were experiencing. This gesture on the part of the apostle taught them the true nature of love and unselfishness.

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