



o6. 1 Thessalonians 3:1 – 4:2

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1 Thessalonians 3:1-2

¹Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; ²and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith

Luke describes Paul's arrival in Athens. Hunted down in Beroea by Jews from Thessalonica, Paul was forced to depart hurriedly and take a ship south to Athens, leaving Silvanus and Timothy behind in Beroea. Paul sent his escort back to Beroea with instructions that the other two missionaries were to join him as soon as possible. Paul stayed on in Athens awaiting their arrival (Acts 17:1-16). When Paul heard what Timothy had to say he sent him back to Thessalonica to 'strengthen and encourage (παρκαλέω)' them in their faith.

1 Thessalonians 3:3-4

³so that no one be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. ⁴In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know.

Why does Paul speak of persecutions as something ‘**we are destined for**’? On his return journey, after the many sufferings which he endured in the cities of southern Galatia, we are told by Luke that Paul: ‘strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, ‘It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God’ (Acts 14:22).

We examined the role of suffering in commenting on 1 Thessalonians 1:6. Whenever we model our lives on Jesus, and take seriously his 'labour of love' (see 1:3), we will find ourselves taking the side of the oppressed, and opposition will inevitably come from those who gain from the oppression, whatever form it might take. To follow Jesus is to come up against the same forces of evil which brought about his crucifixion. As with Jesus, so with the Christian, only love sustained by faith can give meaning to the suffering endured.

1 Thessalonians 3:5

For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain.

Paul sees 'Satan' behind whatever it is that is preventing his return to Thessalonica (2:18). He sees the same evil power as tempting the Thessalonians to abandon their new-found faith in Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

⁶But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us – just as we long to see you. ⁷For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution, we have been encouraged about you through your faith. ⁸For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. ⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Timothy has arrived in Corinth (see Acts 18:5) with news about the situation in Thessalonica. Paul is delighted to be reassured about their ‘**faith and love**’ (see 1:3). He is encouraged (παρκαλέω, see 3:2) to learn that their faith has been strong enough to withstand the persecution that they are undergoing. Paul, too, has had much to suffer, and is delighted by the news that his affectionate regard for them is reciprocated.

The joy he experiences on hearing from them causes Paul, once again, to give thanks (εὐχαριστία) for the action of God in their lives (for the verb εὐχαριστεω, see 1:2; 2:13).

1 Thessalonians 3:11-12

¹¹Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹²And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

God is love and it is the communion in love of Father, Son and Spirit, which is the bond of love uniting the members of the community. Jesus shares his love-communion with Paul, Timothy and Silvanus. They in turn have drawn the Thessalonians into this same love and Paul's prayer is that the community will continue to love one another and to reach out with this love to all. For a fuller reflection on 'love' see the commentary on 1 Thessalonians 1:3.

1 Thessalonians 3:13

¹³May he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus the Messiah with all his saints.

It is the Holy Spirit of God who strengthens their hearts, and they are strengthened in ‘holiness’, for they have received the fullness of the Holy Spirit and, through this consecration, they are living in intimate communion with the all-Holy God. Paul speaks again of the ‘coming’ (παρουσία) of the Messiah (see 2:19), with an allusion to the final judgment when ‘the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him’ (Zechariah 1:5).

With this prayerful expression of his hopes for the Thessalonian community, Paul concludes the first major part of his letter. It has been a sustained and affectionate expression of his gratitude to God for their Christian lives. Paul has also been reminding them of their own experiences with him, in the hope that this memory will support their faith. We are not surprised to find him ending on the theme of love, reminding them in so doing of his own deep affection for them, and his desire that they will be able to stand before the judgment seat of God innocent of sin.

In concluding thus with a prayer, Paul is reminding his readers that prayer disposes us to become aware of what it is in us that is preventing us from listening to God and from receiving God's grace. As God's children we are invited to go to him in trust, praying to grow to be able to know and face the fears that cause us to shy away from love. Prayer is a matter of taking time and creating space to get in touch with our deepest longings and with our religious experience. In our prayer we are to trust that the truth will set us free (John 8:23), and that God would not give us this longing for him if God did not want to fulfil it. To want to love is already to love; to want to be in communion with God is to be already in communion with God; to pray for love is already to receive it.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-2

¹Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you do so more and more. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

Earlier in the letter, Paul reminded the Thessalonians how, as a father, he had urged, encouraged and pleaded with them to lead a life worthy of God (see 2:12). The second part of his letter, beginning here, consists in just such an exhortation.

Before examining the details in the following verses, it is important to highlight the specifically Christian dimension of the moral teaching of Paul.

The Stoics of Paul's day had worked out a system of ethics based on their understanding of human nature. Christians of a later period were fond of expressing their moral teaching in the terms of the current ethical philosophy, both in order to appeal to their non-Christian contemporaries in language that was understandable, and to support the reasonableness of the Christian position. This procedure has an obvious validity, but it must not be allowed to obscure the truth that when Paul speaks of moral behaviour he invariably argues not from an understanding of human nature and its requirements but from the example of Jesus who shares with the believer his Spirit.

Christian living is modelled on that of Jesus and is possible because of the Spirit of Jesus dwelling in us. A person cannot live Christian morality without faith. It obviously cannot be imposed on non-believers, for it is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Paul's urging is an appeal from the risen Christ, and is made 'in the Lord' and 'through the Lord Jesus', that is to say, in communion with him and with his authority.

Paul is not simply offering suggestions. He is speaking of ‘**how you ought to live**’. The obligations are not because they are human but because they are disciples of Jesus. Being human and being a disciple of Jesus are not in opposition. In fact Jesus, being sinless, is perfectly human. The call to live as humanly as Jesus, however, is not made because of the moral strength that the Thessalonians should have as human beings, but because they share in Jesus’ Spirit.

Living a moral life as a Christian is not something we can acquire by our own efforts. It is not a triumph of personal endeavour.

To live a virtuous life self-discipline is necessary, but, as Paul state clearly in his Letter to the Galatians when he speaks of virtues, these are the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Galatians 5:22), not achievements of the self. Paul came to see that we should let go our ego and let the Spirit of Christ fill our hearts and direct our lives.

We are called and graced to let 'Christ live in us' (Galatians 2:19).

As Christians we are to 'clothe ourselves with the Messiah' (Galatians 3:27);

'Put on the Lord Jesus the Messiah' (Romans 13:14).

For Christians virtue is before all else a grace. We are to 'behave in a manner worthy of the vocation to which we have been called' (1 Thessalonians 2:12),

and we do this by living 'in the Messiah' (an expression used by Paul eighty-five times).

We are graced to be able to say with Paul: ‘It is no longer I who live; it is the Messiah who lives in me. The life I live now in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20). Fundamental to our living a moral life as disciples of Jesus is our sharing Jesus’ faith (Galatians 2:16; 3:22).

Jesus revealed God as love. He gave us an example of what it means to welcome God’s love and live by it, but he did more than that – and this takes us to the essential foundation of Christian morality. Jesus continues to give his disciples a share in his faith in God and in his love. We can live a moral life because: ‘God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, “Abba (Father)!” (Galatians 4:6).

If we open our hearts to welcome grace, the Spirit will cause these fruits to grow in our lives. Rather than our struggling to obey a law etched on stone, we are to open our hearts and minds to the call of the Spirit, and allow Christ to live in us (Galatians 2:20).

Christian morality is a morality of love, the love revealed by Jesus on the cross. It is not an achievement of the self. It is a fruit of the Spirit. It is not possible without faith, but it is possible with it, and it is here that Paul places his emphasis. More and more we are to allow Jesus' Spirit to penetrate every aspect of their lives. To 'belong to Christ' (Galatians 3:29) demands that we die to our selfishness (Galatians 5:24) and give our lives in love for others.

As Jesus' disciples we rely, not on our own moral strength, but on the love of the Risen Jesus to whom we look to purify our loving. We are called and graced to be holy. Holiness is what the Spirit does in our lives:

‘We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth’ (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Holiness is before all else a matter of love, and it is this love that we are to give and receive in the bosom of the Christian community.

‘We think of Jesus’ description of the way in which the father welcomed home his wayward son: ‘While he was still far off, his father saw his son and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him’ (Luke 15:20).

It is this same compassionate and persistent love that Jesus himself manifested in the way he lived and in the way he died. It is a gift to us from the heart of Jesus pierced on the cross (John 19:34).

This is the gift of the Spirit, the fountain of living water which flows from Jesus’ breast and wells up in our own (John 7:38).

In his Letter to the community in Colossae (54AD), Paul writes: 'You must live your whole life according to the Messiah you have received – Jesus the Lord. You must be rooted in him, built on him' (Colossians 2:6-7).

He goes on to speak, not of virtues that they should acquire (as one might find in the Stoic manuals of the day), but of the qualities of the Messiah that they have been clothed in.

‘As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and long suffering. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of the Messiah rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of the Messiah dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him’ (Colossians 3:12-17).

Paul is not suggesting that we model ourselves on Christ ‘from the outside’. It is not a matter of our becoming like Christ – certainly not by virtue of our own striving. Rather, we are to allow the life of Jesus to bear fruit in our lives.

Colossians 3:14 speaks of ‘love’ and 3:15 of ‘peace’. Both of these are listed as fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22.

It is in love that ‘we have come to fullness in him’ (Colossians 2:10). It is love that informs all the other virtues, giving them that special quality that identifies them as Christian. It is in experiencing our love (the outer garment that people first see) that others come to experience, through us, the love of Christ.

In his Second Letter to the Christian community in Corinth (55AD) Paul teaches that living a moral life as a Christian is possible because 'If anyone is in the Messiah, there is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17). Judgment of value for the Greeks rested on reason. Paul is clearly appealing to something that transcends reason.

His key criterion is not conformity to human nature. He appeals to the Corinthians to 'examine yourselves to make sure you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you acknowledge that Jesus the Messiah is in you' (2 Corinthians 13:5). Salvation, for Paul, comes through an act of God's gracious love. It is seen in Jesus and the invitation God gives through Jesus for us to live by the same divine Spirit that inspired and gave life to Jesus.

Morality for Paul is the fruit of this saving love. It is impossible without this love. Paul does not argue for the logic of his positions, or attempt to demonstrate that they are inherently consistent. He does not present Christian moral conduct as something to be lived by anyone who might choose to do so. Paul invites people to faith, he invites them into the Christian community, he shows what is possible for a Christian. For himself he prays, not for greater rationality or more determined effort, but that 'the power of the Messiah may stay over me' (2 Corinthians 12:9).

In his Letter to the Romans (57AD) Paul exhorts the Christians, not to be more self disciplined, but to 'put on the Lord Jesus the Messiah' (Romans 13:14). Morality is the fruit of God's liberating love: it is the Messiah living in us. It is impossible to live a moral life free from sin without this gift, even with the law. The gift of 'being alive to God in the Messiah Jesus' (Romans 6:11) is, however, offered to all, without distinction, Jew and Gentile alike.

Paul invites people to faith. He invites people into the Christian community. He invites us to belong to Jesus and to experience his indwelling Spirit. He shows what fruit can come from such a union, fruit that without such a union is quite impossible. For Paul, living with ‘clean hands and a pure heart’ (Psalm 24:4) is possible because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5).

To the community in Philippi (62AD) Paul writes: 'If there is any appeal in the Messiah, any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition. Do not strive after or seek to find your value in things that are worthless, but in humility regard others above yourselves, so that everyone is not focused on themselves, but each is looking to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in the Messiah Jesus' (Philippians 2:1-5).

This goes beyond the training Paul received as a Jew, or the Stoic philosophy that he learned in Tarsus.

It is a new basis for moral living, possible because of the gift of Jesus' mind, heart and Spirit.

The 'compassion' he is speaking of is 'the compassion of the Messiah Jesus' (Philippians 1:8).

The righteousness that Paul lives is 'not a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through the faith of the Messiah, the righteousness from God based on faith' (Philippians 3:9).

Sharing in Jesus' communion with God, the Christian shares in Jesus' faith, and it is this communion that is the basis of living a Christian life.

Paul continues: 'Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever inspires reverence, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever attracts to love, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, give consideration to these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you' (Philippians 4:8-9).

To live a Christian life we need to open ourselves to receive the power of God into our lives. Only this love, as lived by Jesus, can bring healing and meaning to the human condition. There is a place for indicating the reasonableness of Christian morality, but in the final analysis the appeal is to Jesus' promise to share his Spirit with us.

There will always be a sense of sacred mystery about human life and human behaviour. One aim of education will be knowledge, as the Greek moralists said. But more important than knowledge of 'human nature' will be knowledge of Jesus and what he reveals to us about who God is and who we are called and graced to be.

Let us welcome the gift of his Spirit into our hearts. Sharing in his communion with God will purify our hearts. The fruit of his Spirit will be seen in our moral behaviour ('clean hands') as we are 'clothed in the Messiah', till we can say with Paul "I live no longer I. It is the Messiah who lives in me' (Galatians 2:19).