

# 1<sup>st</sup> THESSALONIANS BIBLE STUDY

1 Thessalonians 3:01-13

Lesson #6

## Introduction

### Paul's Concern for the Church

#### Verses 1-5: (Paul Expresses His Concern)

*1 Therefore, when we could no longer stand it, we thought it was better to be left alone in Athens. 2 And we sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you concerning your faith, 3 so that no one will be shaken by these persecutions. For you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we told you previously that we were going to suffer persecution, and as you know, it happened. 5 For this reason, when I could no longer stand it, I also sent to find out about your faith, fearing that the tempter had tempted you and that our labor might be for nothing.* 1 Thess 3:1-5 (HCSB)

I think I need to speak on the likelihood of persecution, even for us in our own country. Because, It isn't a matter of "if" but a matter of "when." It probably won't happen all at once but slowly start and then very quickly begin to escalate to startling proportions. We're seeing the beginnings already, and it won't take much to get it moving into full swing. The unbelieving world is already willing, it's just slowly and carefully testing the waters to see what it can get away with, month by month and year by year. The spirit of persecution is already rampant, and only the restraining force of the Spirit of God holds it in check until the time of its full release. (2 Thes 2:5-8)

I'm sad to have to tell you this, but we Christians weren't meant to win this battle, or we could and we would. But the scriptures have declared that this is ordained by God, as a part of His overall plan, and we must accept His dictates, and play our parts as He directs. (vv.3,4) Our future and our kingdom is not in this age, or even in this creation, but a whole new creation is awaiting us, and therein lies our hope and our victory. To ultimately win, we must first lose; to live, we must first die; to overcome, we must first be overcome. This is the way our heavenly Father has planned it, and we must honor His wisdom and bow to His authority. He even used this procedure for his only beloved Son, who first was overcome and put to death by sinful men, but now has risen again and overcome death, and will forever rule unopposed over all creation.

Our heavenly Father has determined to accomplish His predetermined plans through the judicious use of various means. And he carries out these predetermined plans, and accomplishes His desires, by the expeditious use of these various means. The means themselves are part of the plan. Do you understand what I'm saying? The means that God uses to get His work done are the very things that He's planned for us to learn and make us ready for His eternal kingdom. To try to escape the means is to try to escape the plan itself, and circumvent the learning and preparation process. The Lord Jesus himself acknowledged this in His prayer to his Father just before his arrest and crucifixion. There is no escaping the process and still fulfilling the divine purpose. Therefore, our prayer, just as His prayer, is for our Fathers' will to be done, even if it's not what we want, and for Him to strengthen us to accept and persevere, so that through various and diverse trials we might be made suitable companions for our Savior, and worshipers of our God.

As distressing as this sounds, and is, we have the comforting word of God that we will not be tempted to join, and to indulge in the sins of the world beyond our capabilities of endurance, (1Co 10:13) and, we are kept faithful in our belief by the power of God through the divine gift of saving faith, (1 Pet 1:5) so that just as Jesus, we may be put to death by man, but we will be raised by the power of God to eternal life, and righteousness, and glory, when He takes His place as King of kings and Lord of lords. (Rev 19) It is the endurance of hardships and persecution to the end that accompanies God's election, and authenticates our profession of faith as His chosen children. (Mat 10:22)

Now I hope you can forgive my candor, but I have to tell you that I'm very often wearied by the seemingly endless array of television preachers and evangelists who spend almost all their time in the Old Testament. Taking all the tenets of the old covenant with Israel, regarding God's blessing for obedience, and trying to force them into the new covenant of Jesus Christ. They take the statements regarding God's protection of Israel and superimposed them onto the Christians of the new covenant. But, what they seem to be missing, is that there are differences between the old covenant and the new covenant. That's why there is a new covenant, because there are differences. Failure to recognize these differences blurs the line between the covenants, and even sometimes constitutes an offense to the person and work of Jesus in establishing that new covenant.

There is no denying that the old covenant provided earthly protections to the Jews in return for their faithfulness and obedience to God. He promised to prosper them, heal their sicknesses, overcome their enemies, and meet all their needs. But the whole point of the Old Testament is to show us that mankind was incapable of fulfilling his portion of this covenant. That ultimately the promises of prosperity became the promises of judgment, because man is inherently unfaithful. For this reason, after demonstrating the unworkability, God promised a whole new and better covenant, as described in Jeremiah chapter 31, and Ezekiel chapter 36.

Let me announce with great joy that, that covenant has arrived. In first Corinthians chapter 11 Jesus lifted up his cup and said "this is the new covenant in my blood," and announced the arrival of God's promise. This covenant has conditions and provisions that are different from the old covenant, and it behooves us to recognize those differences. Now I'm not saying for one second that God has changed his nature, I'm saying that he has provided a new covenant with mankind, and that new covenant has new provisions. That's why it's called new.

The old covenant dealt much more with the here and now. Providing earthly blessings or earthly judgments based on obedience to God's commandments. It was essentially an earthly covenant. But the new covenant is far greater, for many reasons, not the least of which is that it isn't an earthly covenant but a heavenly covenant. And therefore the blessings of this covenant are not earthly, but heavenly. The benefits of obedience under the new covenant, strangely enough, bring immediate persecutions and hardships as opposed to earthly blessings, and place the benefits in a kingdom and a realm that is not of this present world. The writer of Hebrews said it is a better covenant because it is based on better promises.

It is a sad thing, and I might say an insult to the Lord Jesus Christ to try to make old covenant Jews out of new covenant Christians. Doing so tramples on the blood of Jesus. Just as there is a distinction in the provisions of the covenant, there is a distinction in what is the very essence of the two entities. The Church is not Israel. The church is not simply a Gentile group who has now inherited the old covenant because the Jews were unfaithful. The church is much more than that. The church is called the bride of Jesus Christ, and holds a very unique position in the eyes of God. The church has not become Israel, and Israel has not become the church. I realize now that I'm starting to step on the toes of some of my dear reformed brothers, but I have to call it like I see it.

All of the preachers who are still preaching and teaching predominantly from the Old Testament, and there's Christians who say they specialize in just the Old Testament, are sadly missing the whole point. Let me announce to you dear brothers that Christ Jesus is the new covenant, and as the voice said from heaven "listen to him." Let's please stop trying to force and impose the old covenant provisions onto the new. Let's stop trying to make Jews out of Christians. All of you dear brothers who are preaching these principles and precepts are our modern day Pharisees and Judaizers.

The initiator of our new covenant, Christ Jesus, has told us the terms, and these terms include persecutions and hardships, not earthly prosperity. Yes, Jesus did heal a few, but his covenant doesn't promise everyone good health. What it promises is forgiveness of sin and enduring faith. If you are alive today, and call yourself a Christian, then please do not remain ignorant of the covenant by which you claim that name. Stop preaching health and wealth and prosperity and read what Jesus said about those who wish to be his disciples, and what they might expect in this present life. Stop misleading Christians by mixing up your covenants. Rejoice and give thanks that you were born during this time of Christ Jesus and learn to embrace the real promises and the real benefits of his new covenant.

These misleading teachings that promote unrealistic expectations are the very things that can shake one's faith. If you think that Jesus has promised you prosperity and safety then what you do if you become sick or persecuted? These false teachers will tell you it's because your faith is deficient, so you go home and try to muster up more faith, and when that doesn't work you throw in the towel and give up.

This is the danger of false teachings, they damage the faith of the saints who've never been taught the truth. And that's exactly what Paul is endeavoring to prevent in this letter to the Thessalonians. He's telling them to expect persecutions, and to make themselves ready, because they're part of the plan of God. And knowing that from the beginning provides great comfort when and if the persecutions start. It doesn't make them stop, but it does make them understandable, and by that it makes them bearable. This was Paul's goal in these verses, and now we get to see his response when Timothy returns with a report from his visit.

### **Verses 6-10: (Paul Declares His Joy over Their Faith)**

***6 But now Timothy has come to us from you and brought us good news about your faith and love, and that you always have good memories of us, wanting to see us, as we also want to see you. 7 Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution, we were encouraged about you through your faith. 8 For now we live, if you stand firm in the Lord. 9 How can we thank God for you in return for all the joy we experience because of you before our God, 10 as we pray earnestly night and day to see you face to face and to complete what is lacking in your faith?***

1 Thess 3:6-10 (HCSB)

As we read in the first five verses, Paul's concern for the Thessalonians led him to send Timothy back to help encourage them and to find out for himself how they were doing. When Timothy returned he brought good news about their faith, and their perseverance, and their love for Paul and the saints. We can see from these verses that Paul is greatly encouraged by the good report from Timothy. In verse eight he says "for now we live, if you stand firm in the Lord."

And then he goes on to thank God for preserving and protecting the faith of the Thessalonian believers. As we said in our first group of verses, Paul always knows who to thank for the gifts of God. And just as he had earlier thanked God for the initial response of their belief, he now thanks God for their continuing perseverance in the faith. Now this doesn't mean that the believers themselves didn't have to suffer the persecutions and maintain their faith through active participation, but the driving force which motivated and enabled them to do so was the gift of God.

And then Paul says that he and his companions earnestly pray night and day to be able to return and see them face-to-face so that he can impart to them more vital elements of the gospel which they still hadn't had time to learn. Then in verses 11 through 13 Paul prays for the Thessalonian believers.

### **Verses 11-13: (Paul's Prays for the Church)**

***11 Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you. 12 And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone, just as we also do for you. 13 May He make your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. Amen.***

1 Thess 3:11-13 (HCSB)

In his prayer Paul prays that they would increase. And what is it that he wants to see increase? Well it must be the number of church members right? Isn't that always what the scriptures mean when they say increase? There's certainly many who think that, and regardless of the context use these verses that way, but Paul never uses the term increase in his epistles regarding numbers, but rather spiritual maturity, love for one another, and personal sanctification.

And so it is here, where he prays for their increase and overflow of love for one another and for everyone. Remember, they're suffering severe persecutions and Paul is telling them to earnestly seek to love everyone, or at least treat them lovingly. Then he goes on to pray that their hearts would be blameless in holiness before God at the coming of the Lord Jesus with all His saints. Treating everyone lovingly is certainly a good start at having a blameless heart before God. This is what Jesus did even in the face of brutal and humiliating treatment, and He maintained a blameless heart before His Father and before all mankind.

At the end of verse 13 Paul says “at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” I’ve read various comments by other teachers on this verse. The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is a phrase that the Bible uses frequently. In the Old Testament the Jews were told that their Messiah would come, but what they didn’t understand was that he would come more than once, and under very different circumstances. The failure to recognize the difference left them unprepared when he did come because they didn’t rightly know what to expect.

In a very similar manner the new covenant believers face the same situation. The Scriptures speak of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, but is it a single return, or like the prophecies to the Jews, will there be multiple aspects to it? The answer is absolutely yes, there are multiple aspects, and failure to recognize the differences will leave New Testament believers in the same predicament as the Jews.

In the most general terms the phrase “the coming of the Lord Jesus” generally refers to his bodily return to earth with his saints who have been previously caught up to heaven, and all return with him at his visible, physical, bodily return to earth, as described in Revelation chapter 19. This is the grand consummate coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to take his place as King of Kings and Lord of lords.

However, he does come back prior to this to catch up his saints who are still alive on the earth into the clouds with him. According to scriptures this is not a visible return. That’s why some say it’s a secret return. But the Bible doesn’t say it’s secret, in fact it’s anything but secret.

Let me say here that almost everyone that I’ve heard call this a “secret” return is using it mockingly. Suggesting that this idea is some quasi-gnostic type of mysterious teaching not found in scriptures, and thereby spreading doubt on its validity. But it can only be a secret to ones who are ignorant of the scriptures, because whether you interpret it the same way or not, you cannot truthfully imply that it isn’t found there. Just because it isn’t visible to the unbelieving masses doesn’t mean it’s a secret, because the scriptures teach it quite well, and in multiple places.

Besides, It certainly won’t be a secret when millions of people all over the earth simply vanish in the twinkling of an eye. And it’s for this reason that I never refer to this snatching away, which is taught in first Thessalonians and in first Corinthians as “His return.” Because this event isn’t “the return” that’s most generally referred to by that phrase.

Now we’ll get into all of this in much greater detail later on in chapter 4, but I wanted to clear this up so that we go into those verses with a proper understanding. In this verse Paul says, the return *with* his saints, not *for* his saints, therefore, in this particular phrase, Paul can only be referring to his bodily earthly return as described in Revelation 19, because He’s already *with* His saints. And furthermore, it’s here that the saints have been evaluated at the judgement seat of Christ, appropriately rewarded, and finally made perfect for their return to take their place beside their Savior.

### **Conclusion:**

This epistle was prompted by Paul’s concern for the response of the new believers to rejection and persecution. Of course we know that all scripture is inspired by God, but He uses means to accomplish His ends. The means was Paul’s concern for the believers under harsh, even perhaps dire circumstances. In direct contrast to what is the popular thinking of the day, Jesus told His disciples exactly what discipleship meant, and that’s recorded very well in Matthew 16, verses 24-27, and again in Luke 9, verses 21-26.

We should all be very familiar with what these verses say, but what we aren’t familiar with is the actual reality of them. Because we’ve been spared that situation, so far. We’ve grown up in a country that has a constitution which protects our individual right to openly practice our religious beliefs without government sanctions of any kind, either pro or con. We’ve prospered under this constitution for over 200 years, and have never known any other way. We think it’s our right and we can’t have it taken away, but history, and scriptures, very much indicate otherwise.

Anything and everything that certain men have established, other men can abolish and destroy. Every great empire of earthly history has fallen from power by one means or another. If they weren't overpowered from outside then they decayed from inside, but they all diminished over time. History is a harsh and cynical teacher when it comes to humankind. While we have been very successful technologically, we don't seem to have improved at all morally and ethically.

Mankind is kind of like children playing with toys. Everything's fine as long as their toys aren't particularly dangerous. But if these children get a hold of things like knives, and guns then there is bound to be problems. And it might be said that this is a picture of humanity. We weren't too bad off before our toys became dangerous. But now our toys have very much progressed, but we have not, and consequently serious consequences are inevitable. It can't be long until our childish lack of morality and ethics prompt us to put these new toys to very dangerous uses.

But again, it really isn't the implements but the users of the implements. Before we start putting these things to bad uses, we have to convince ourselves that we're justified to do so. And we're really good at doing that. You don't have to go back into ancient history to find examples of this. Just look at Germany in the early 1930's. One man was successful at convincing a whole nation that it was a good thing to exterminate a whole race of people and take over the world. And he's only one example of many such deceivers who've successfully taken over governments and countries.

And here we are today. We call ourselves Americans, and we really seem to think that no such thing could ever possibly happen to us. We're too wise and too benevolent to fall for such trickery. And we're too powerful to be overthrown. Let me remind you that the king of Babylon was in the midst of a great party celebrating the invincibility of his world empire when the Medes and Persians attacked and overthrew his invincible empire. And really nasty party crashers they turned out to be.

The Babylonians had become so decadent that God handed them over to destruction. But it didn't happen overnight. The empire lasted many years. History is replete with examples of empires and nations that were, for a time invincible, but finally diminished. And everyone of them shares some common traits. They often, but not always, began with honorable intentions, but eventually gave way to moral decay. None ever improved in morality, character, and ethics over the length of their reign. So what does all this mean?

Well, it means that we Americans shouldn't ever take our present day freedoms for granted. We have been spared thus far from persecutions by our government and by powerful enemies. But this is not the norm by any means, it's the exception, and sadly it's not likely to last forever. Both history and scripture indicate that it's destined to decay with time, not improve. And that's exactly what we're seeing isn't it? I just recently met a Christian brother whom I had never seen before, and in the course of our conversation he mentioned his concerns for the direction, and especially the rate of decline of morality, and open hostility towards the Christian faith that's emerging in our country. We all see this.

So, as we start to see these things happening and escalating let's not be surprised. Let us not be shaken from our faith in Christ Jesus, because he's warned us that these things are coming. Let us be like the Thessalonians who persevered in their faith in spite of the persecutions. Paul never suggested that they should like them, but rather that they had been appointed to these things by the Lord, and they were an opportunity and a means to test and refine the faith of the true believers. (1Pet 1:6-9) [Read these verses now.](#)

In times of great prosperity it's very difficult for one to truly know what they love and what they just think they love. If love is not tested it can simply be proclaimed without cost. But perhaps it is the mercy of the Lord that He provides a background setting that often includes persecution so that one may know for sure if the faith and the love they proclaim is genuine. We've all heard many stories of people who call themselves Christians for years and then totally abandoned their faith when one of their loved ones dies or some other tragedy happens. This is not the response of the elect children of God. It is those who endure to the end who show themselves to be among the saved. So, persecution is a means to purify the Lord's body, His church. As unpleasant as it is, it would seem that the Lord has determined that this is a necessary part of the growth and maturity of His eternal mate.

If it is God's will that our country should need to see persecution for the good of the church, there will be a monumental exodus within the churches in this country. All of these seeker friendly efforts to increase membership amongst the unregenerate will be immediately reversed, and churches will begin to empty out by the thousands. Masses of people who call themselves Christians, and actually believe they are, will realize for the first time what that term really means, and find out if they really are what they say they are. When being a Christian might mean losing your job, or losing your home, or even being imprisoned or killed, who then will stand up and say "yes" I believe in Jesus Christ?

We all know that there are places in this world today where this is the case. Where openly declaring yourself a Christian will cost you everything, but still there are a precious few who do so anyway. Why do they do this? It would be pointless for me to try to answer, because, those who are truly children of God already know the answer, and those who are not wouldn't understand it. Jesus told His disciples exactly what to expect if they wished to follow after Him:

#### The Meaning of Discipleship

*24 "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. 25 "It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, and the slave like his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul , how much more will they malign the members of his household!*

*26 "Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 27 "What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops. 28 "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 "So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.*

*32 "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. 33 "But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.*

*34 "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.35 "For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; 36 and a man's enemies will be the members of his household.*

*37 "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.38 "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. 39 "He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it.*

Matt 10:24-39 (NASB)

These passages, from the lips of Jesus, are literally a call to surrender everything to the Lordship of Jesus. To surrender even the closest family ties if that's what's necessary. To never disavow our faith in Jesus Christ openly before mankind, even if it costs us our life. These are very strong words here by Jesus, that say, if we do publically disavow Him to save our earthly lives, or even the earthly lives of our own family members, then He will publically disavow us before his Father in heaven, but, if we are faithful even unto death, He will be faithful to raise us up again, and declare our names before his Father in heaven. This is very serious business. This is nothing whatsoever like the frivolous, childish, selfish, man-centered, preaching that we hear in our current day churches.

If the churches of our country begin to see times like this there will be a massive thinning out in quantity, but an immense growth in purity, maturity, and holiness, which are the appropriate characteristics of the true body of Christ. Now I certainly don't look forward to experiencing something like this, but I have to confess that I surely can see the wisdom in it, should the Lord decide to do so. If that should be the case then our earnest prayers, night and day, would be that the Lord will grant us perseverance of faith and steadfastness in the truth, to His eternal praise and glory. Amen.