

ENCOURAGED

1 Thessalonians 3:4-13

Travel Adventure Advertisement – Plan 1:

“Everything you need is provided for you on this adventure tour. Food and drinks are prepaid and you get to enjoy the finest cuisine at your convenience any time of the day. You will be treated to luxury accommodations and transportation to various sites of interest throughout your entire time. Your physical safety and happiness are at the top of our priorities for all who choose to be a part of this grand adventure. Enjoy being treated like royalty! All of this is available for a very reasonable and low price. Sign up today, and become part of this elite group of special people who have benefitted from this unique opportunity.” Who wouldn’t want to do this?

Travel Adventure Advertisement – Plan 2:

“Looking for the adventure of a lifetime? We have the perfect plan for you. Here’s what you can expect: You will be radically changed as a result of this adventure and a lot of your values will be changed. Other things that might happen are that you won’t be allowed to worship and have social interactions; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he is doing God a favor. You’ll need to provide your own food and share it with others. That is just the beginning, because people will hate you, exclude you, revile you, and label you with reprehensible names. Your adventure leader will be there to encourage you and walk along with you during these hard difficulties and persecutions. You must listen to him constantly and do as he tells you or you will miss out on the experiential benefits of this trip. Regardless of how conciliatory you are, you will be defamed and regarded as the worst filth of the world and refuse of the universe since the beginning of time. It only gets worse. You will suffer greatly and could be put to death because you are the object of hatred just because you are part of this great adventure. Just remember, we told everyone that all this was going to happen and you will not be exempt. You will be expected to help others who are your companions and even to be gracious to those who are hurting you. You will be much wiser and have a better understanding of life as things progress. Sign up today and join with this motley crew on an adventure of a lifetime.” No waiting to sign up for this adventure.

Distressed – 3:4-5

⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. 1 Thessalonians 3:4–5 (ESV)

Being a Christian is not a Sunday School Picnic. Why would anyone choose Plan 2 rather than Plan 1? What is different about a group who would knowingly expose themselves to such hardships and those who would choose a life of blissful happiness? The difference is in how life is viewed and the understanding of what constitutes reality. If all of reality is encompassed in material and physical existence, humanity temporarily experiences this and then death comes which ends that existence, then Plan 1 is a logical choice. On the other hand, those who have cognizance that reality is much more than physical and material but includes the spiritual dimension which transcends time, then Plan 2 is seen as preparation and training to equip humanity to function in this transcendent realm of reality.

It may be helpful to look back one verse to see that the afflictions that Christians suffer (verse four) are not just happenstance but are “appointments.” In other words, persecution and problems come with the journey that we are on. Paul had repeatedly warned them (kept telling you beforehand) that affliction was coming and these new Christians were already experiencing

this very thing.

How can we avoid such persecution, problems and afflictions? Assuming that a decision was made to believe and trust in the completed work of Christ so that we are part of the Kingdom of God, then one way to avoid trouble is to not let others know about this change in our lives. How would people know that we have become a new person and that old things had passed away and all things had become new? One possibility is that we might deliberately tell them. The other obvious possibility is that they observe our behavior and actually notice a change in that behavior. If our behavior doesn't change so that no one notices it and we don't say anything, then we might very well avoid the afflictions that Paul wrote about. Another possibility is that our behavior does change and that we do tell others but we confine ourselves to interacting only with those who are like minded. Can we think of how we could actually make that happen? What would such a choice remind us of? We might think that this would be like living in a monastery or maybe in a modern-day church environment.

What would be some concerns if a new, immature Christian were to encounter persecution and other negative reactions from those with whom he or she needed to interact on a regular basis? One possibility is that the new Christian might become discouraged and revert to their previous lifestyle choices in the way they live. We all have likely known people who were enthusiastic and positive following their salvation only to become blasé or indifferent regarding their salvation and essentially there was little or no difference in their lives before and after their decision to follow Christ.

When a person or a church no longer shows evidence of their salvation, then the underlying root issue is most likely related to their faith. In fact, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to strengthen and establishment these new believers in their faith. Without such encouragement, people can be moved or influenced in the way they live.

A person's faith can be weakened when they are tempted to abandon their commitment to embracing the truth. When this happens, they return to what is familiar to them and to start believing and living by the philosophies of the world, the flesh and the devil. There are multiple voices that bombard us with bad ideas and unworkable responses and very few voices that point us in the right direction which is toward pleasing and drawing closer to God.

Paul was concerned that these new believers might simply give in and give up to such temptations and the sacrifices that he (and others) had made would be for nothing. Today the danger doesn't come so much from direct attacks on the church but by more subtle means. When various believers in a church begin following the latest fads and get caught up in trendy ways to do church, then the typical outcome of such diversity of beliefs is that unity is destroyed and little is done to extend the Kingdom of God which is an essential purpose of the church. When a local church body or individual Christians are not fulfilling the commission and purposeful work that God has for them, then the results are full of emptiness and vanity. Christians need to be encouraged and strengthened so that their salvation is not in vain.

Rejuvenated – 3:6-10

⁶ 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— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? 1 Thessalonians 3:6–10 (ESV)

Paul was able to assure the Christians in Thessalonica that his concerns regarding the

firmness of their faith and the resulting expressions of their love were affirmatively answered by Timothy's report of how well they were doing. Paul realized that these new Christians would need encouragement in the face of temptations and afflictions to be able to bear up under the burdens of stresses that arise from just living but also to be victorious when things become more challenging since they were living counter to the culture since they had aligned themselves with the Most High God. We are sometime neglectful when it comes to maintaining contact with new believers so as to encourage them and help them become stronger spiritually.

An interesting twist is seen here in this passage that should help make us aware that those who are more mature in their faith walk also need encouragement since the distresses and afflictions do not stop in our lives as we mature. Paul could report that just hearing the good report of how well the church at Thessalonica was doing was an encouragement to him. At the time he wrote this letter, he was in Corinth and there were many things happening there that were serious concerns for Paul. Just hearing that some groups were "functioning well" provided some real hope that faith and love could emerge from the chaos that he was encountering in the church of Corinth. The lesson for us today is that we should look for and take opportunities to encourage Church leaders since they are likely dealing with issues that are as difficult as Paul was experiencing.

Paul was certainly aware that the successes that he was seeing unfold in Thessalonica were a result of what God was doing in their lives and he did not have the appropriate words to properly thank God for this good outcome of many new, faithful believers. Not only was Paul thankful for them, he was also thankful for the joy he experienced in learning about them and their continuing proper relationship to God through Christ. This joy that comes in seeing the desirable results actually come into being can be a powerful motivation that would enable a person to remain faithful even in the face of significant pain, suffering, hard work, and other afflictions. This reminds us of what we read of Christ in Hebrews 12:2 "For the joy set before Him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Another important lesson for us to learn from these verses is that when victory is evident in the lives of people, situations, and circumstances for which we have prayed that we still need to keep on praying. The reason for this is the lives of people are continually changing, situations are continually changing and circumstances are in constant flux. We take great comfort in remembering a passage such as Lamentations 3:22-23 "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his mercies never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." However, we must also keep in mind that the enemy of our souls has great hatred and wants to consume us and the persecutions, temptations, and affliction will keep coming.

Paul was also praying for an opportunity to see them again and to have meaningful interactions that would result in further strengthening of their faith. As challenges change and afflictions increase, then our faith needs to grow and become more faithful to meet and overcome these problems. As we can see in our own lives, problems and challenges and troubles just keep on growing and we need to be continually praying, "Lord, increase our faith."

How important is it in our relationships and interactions with each other to have face-to-face encounters? We have had an opportunity to experience "virtual" interactions during the past couple of years and most of us found them to be less than satisfying. Writing letters, sending emails, and even doing video chats are not as beneficial as being there in person when we are developing and strengthening relationships. There are many ways that we interact and communicate with each other that go much deeper than written and spoken words and cannot be

duplicated by a video interchange.

There is an aura or spiritual power (influence) that can subtly impact interpersonal interactions. This phenomenon is practically undetectable and difficult to describe but it is real and can be either positive or negative. It can be an “attracting” effect or a “repulsive” one but in most cases, it is probably neutral especially if the aura is weak or our sensitivity to it is weak. This extra level of communication is likely the reason many would rather meet together for church rather than settle for a video presentation of a worship service.

Focused – 3:11-13

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ 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. 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 (ESV)

Paul concluded this portion of his letter dealing with encouragement and affirmation with a brief prayer for them to continue as they are being transformed from the ways of the world to the ways of the Kingdom of God. Paul realized that any real progress would be because God was at work in them to bring about life-altering changes that would be evident in their way of thinking, how they communicated with others, as well as the actions they took in ordinary life events. It was important that they realize that such changes were underway and for them to be cooperative with the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives to use whatever was happening to them to move them in the direction of becoming more like God in holiness that would result in the right behavior toward other people and toward the physical world in which they lived.

Most important is that this work that was being done in their very being would result in their being seen in God’s eyes as they were intended to be when He created humanity in His image. Just as God told Abraham that he was to walk blamelessly before God, which would require that his fundamental nature be aligned with the holiness of God, we are to be conformed to that same likeness that was boldly evident in Christ. This same transforming process (sanctification) is at work, even in us today, so that we are seen in the eyes of God as being in the presence of Christ with His holy ones (saints) who are complete in Him.