

It's been a long time since I went to school, but I still remember Newton's third law – every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Mr Newton explains why I can squeeze toothpaste out of that little tube when I brush my teeth. When you put pressure on something, it causes a reaction. The harder you squeeze, the more toothpaste you end up with.

What happens when we put pressure on a Christian? The answer is ...we don't know until we are in that situation. Some possibilities are: anger, complaints, excuses, backsliding or perhaps joy, worship, prayer, faithfulness.

As we continue with Thessalonians, it's important to remember this church was only a few weeks old when its founder was forced to flee for his life. But that does not mean they had nothing going for them. For a start we're told in chapter one, God called them, the Holy Spirit convicted them, and they had the powerful, although short term, discipling of Paul.

Now Paul is concerned what might have happened to them. He knew from his own experience they would be persecuted by the same forces that drove him out of town.

So anxious was he, that he makes the hard decision to forego the comfort of fellow Christians around him. He's prepared to be left alone - when he sends Timothy. V.1:

When we could stand it no longer, thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens - so send Tim

What was Timothy meant to do?

v.2-3 ... to strengthen and encourage you in your faith so that no one would be unsettled by these trials ...

We don't have to imagine the relief Paul felt, when he received the news from Timothy. He tells them of the joy and encouragement he gained from them. It's a good reminder, that ministry is a two-way street. It's not simply a matter of the minister helping them, but the result of ministry can be encouraging to the Christian worker. When you think about it, it would be strange if that wasn't the case!

Paul's response is to break into spontaneous prayer – which begins with thankfulness to God – which is always a good way to start in prayer - and then he proceeds to cover the three areas we were first introduced to in chapter 1 - **faith, love and hope** vs 10 -13

1. Faith

It seems faith was a big deal for Paul. He mentions it five times in 9 verses (2-10). They can be encouraged in it by Timothy, v2, it's something the tempter can destroy v 5 its existence is good news, v 6, a source of encouragement for others v 7, and it can be developed by other Christians v 10

v.10 - Pastor Paul wants to see them again. We're talking about more than putting an arm around their shoulder - good mates catching up again. He wants to see them, not just because he misses them (which he does), but so he can **supply what is lacking in their faith.**

What does 'lacking in faith' mean?

The word translated “lacking” is used for a fisherman repairing his nets or a surgeon resetting a broken bone.

What could cause their (and our) faith to falter? What trials could shake us so much, that we need repairs - lest we begin to question everything we know about God?

Clearly persecution is one thing he had in mind. Paul warned them in v 4 that persecution is inevitable. We’ve learnt a great deal about the challenges that might bring, from what happened to Paul at Philippi (see Acts 17:1-10).

Jesus gave similar warnings to his disciples (Matthew 5:11: **Blessed are you when people persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account**).

There is no doubt some Christians face unbelievable persecution. Without downplaying the persecution many suffer, I suspect much of our persecution is closer to cynicism or indifference or polite (or perhaps impolite) tolerance, rather than aggression.

If persecution is the only “trial” that can damage our faith, does that mean we don’t have too much to worry about – at least until things deteriorate in Australia?

Even asking the question suggests that can’t be right.

Although trials include persecution, it also refers to the normal ups and downs we all experience in life – especially the downs.

It’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking that if we trust God, everything will be easy. We’ll have no more struggles, no more pain, or accidents, or disappointments - no more temptation, or need for repentance. That will be true in heaven, but on Earth we will continue to experience heartache and temptation and doubt. It’s not just persecution, but the trials and tribulations of everyday life that can sometimes make us want to give up.

It’s tempting to explain the 2nd reading from Ps 40 as David’s before and after experience. Before he trusted God, life was like a slimy pit, in swampy, boggy ground. But afterwards, it’s all rock and firm standing. But we know that is not how life works – nor is it what the Bible teaches.

Supply what is lacking in your faith means learning to hang on in there when life doesn’t seem fair, when others seem to coast through with no problems, while we bounce between disasters.

It’s ironic – but the people who seem to know God best – have often had the hardest lives. I once said to friend who had had more than her share of problems, ‘**I would love to have your faith**’. She responded “**it’s not my faith you need, but the God behind my faith.**”

As I was researching this message, I came across this saying which I found very helpful – I put it out there for you to do with as you will...

The truth is that trials mean God loves us enough to give us the best when we may only desire what is easy. The symbol of Christianity is the cross, not a feather bed.

As we progress in the Christian life, as we seek to live more for God than ourselves – for some people their faith will be like the athlete powering towards the finish line. For the rest of us, it’s closer to watching my granddaughter learning to walk – with stumbles, and falls and getting up again, only to fall again.

The good news is, she will get better and better with practice

2. Love

Paul continues the same theme of progression when he prays for something a little bit unexpected – **May the Lord make your love increase & overflow for each other and for everyone else.** It's unexpected_because_he's already praised them for their love as a church. Why pray for more love? Surely there are other things to ask for.

Do you want to know what our church is like? Invite a friend along and see how they are treated. I think we rate fairly well in the welcoming stakes. We are also doing okay in a whole bunch of the programs we run through the week. Not perfect, I'm sure there are many people who slip through the gaps. That's the thing about love. We can always do better.

Paul asks God to help them grow in love – because he realises, we can never have enough love for others. Paul didn't just tell them the gospel. He shared his life with them, as a genuine demonstration of his love and commitment to them. We gained a glimpse of his pastoral heart earlier, when he equated his ministry to a nursing mother caring for her children or a father encouraging, comforting and urging his children to live lives worthy of God's calling (2:6,11)

Love is not a fixed goal: *Right! I've mastered that! What's next?* Rather, it involves incremental growth. Love is an ongoing work in progress, which adjusts to meet the changing needs around us.

I know people who love – you know the type. It's just a pleasure being around them. However, it never occurs to me to pray they may be more loving. I just assume their love will continue. Why should it?

People who love, who are effective in Christian life, are the ones Satan is most likely to attack? Isn't that something Paul is warning about in v 5?

I was afraid that the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain.

So, one lesson for us today is - pray for those people who reflect the love of God in their lives – that their love might continue/expand.

3. Hope

That you will be blameless and holy when Jesus Christ returns

"blameless" – doesn't mean perfect, but learning to deal appropriately with wrong. This means recognising our failings and confessing, knowing we are forgiven. It means, asking God to help us mature as Christians.

Some people think the end of this life is the finish line. For Christians, the end of this life is only the starting line. Everything we do/learn beforehand is to prepare us for the journey/race that never ends. This long view is only made possible by Jesus' resurrection.

At the second coming, Jesus' followers will be rewarded, and evil will be punished. Following Jesus, and living in a way that pleases him, is never wasted effort. The benefits of our obedience to him far surpass anything this world has to offer.

Hope changes our hearts/perspective - giving us the strength to do what's right and trust God will work things out.

What happens when you put a Christian under pressure? For some it means anger, complaints, excuses, backsliding or at least joyless Christianity. I don't wish tough times on anyone. However, it seems that God uses trials/circumstances to encourage us to rely on Him.

The Christian life was never meant to be me and God against the world. We all need encouragement, instruction, guidance, help from other Christians - that is why God puts us in a church, rather than struggling alone.

If you ever feel like giving up, staying **connected** - through prayer, reading your Bible and fellowship with people - provides the strength and the encouragement we all need to keep going.