

HEALTHY CHRISTIANS

I Thessalonians 1:1-3

Churches are being subjected to unprecedented stress and strain. Whatever the causes, fewer are attending their services and heeding their calls. Many within their membership are unsaved. They have made a profession of salvation, but have never possessed it. Not every professor is a possessor, even though every possessor should be a professor. Our Lord expects His people to make a profession of their faith in Him, and that is certainly the least they can do to show their gratitude for His salvation. It is regrettable that many who were formerly faithful members of their churches have allowed themselves to forget the existence of these organizations and seem to care little or nothing about their purpose and mission.

Paul, Silas and Timothy had been the ones who had given the gospel of Christ to the Thessalonians. After they had received Christ as their Saviour, they became members of the church which Paul and his assistants organized in Thessalonica. This church became a real lighthouse for the gospel of Christ in the midst of heathen darkness. When Silas and Timothy returned from a mission of instruction in the midst of these church members, Paul was encouraged greatly by the report which they brought to him. Paul relived in memory the events connected with the founding of that church, was encouraged to greater boldness in his preaching at Corinth and proceeded to write this letter from which our text is taken.

As Paul thought about these believers and prayed for them incessantly, he could not refrain from thanking God that not only some but all of them were such healthy Christians. These thanksgivings were addressed to God because the spiritual prosperity of the Thessalonians was not due to themselves or to those who had preached the gospel to them, but to the grace of God. He was given the honor that was due to Him in view of the marvelous things He had done in and through them.

The things which they exhibited and which Paul and his associates remembered and for which they repeatedly thanked God were three in number.

I. A Faith That Was Active.

Their church was composed of members who had been born again and saved by the grace of God. Faith was a means to their salvation, the hand of the soul, so to speak, which had brought salvation to each of them. When Paul referred to their "work of faith" he meant their works which sprang from, belonged to and were characteristic of their faith.

Paul was very emphatic that salvation is always a matter of faith and never of works. He used the strongest expressions to make it clear that no man is ever saved by works. But when this truth was not in dispute He often spoke of the good works which characterize the life of faith. To Paul faith was a warm personal trust in the living Saviour, and such faith cannot fail to transform the whole of life and issue in good works. If your faith in Christ does not cause you to do something, it is not genuine. That is why Paul wrote: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10). That is also why James wrote: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:26).

Work is the natural fruit and evidence of faith. The faith of healthy Christians works. Are we healthy in this respect? God has qualified us for and called us to a definite work for Him. The work to which He has called us is worthy of our very best energies and efforts. God expects us to do the work which He has assigned to us and will enable us to do it.

Faith is that operative principle or working power in life whereby we are enabled to master our circumstances daily, and this is precisely what every Christian urgently needs in these days.

II. A Love That Was Laborious.

Paul's statement, "your labor of love," makes it necessary for us to distinguish between "work" and "labor." "Work" points to the thing done, as a matter of achievement. "Labor" refers to the pains taken and the cost expended in the process of doing it, as a matter of exertion. It is not simply doing something, but doing something that costs. "Work" may be easy and delightful. "Labor" is harder than work. It involves effort and toil. The fact that labor is toilsome explains why a selfish person will not engage in it for the sake of another or others.

Paul did not state precisely what form of toil the labor of the Thessalonians took, but, reading between the lines, we can see that it involved devoted service to fellow-believers, courageous attempts to persuade pagans to give up their idols and to acknowledge the true and living God, the loss of old friends, the loss of the means of earning a livelihood, and the endurance of much mental and physical suffering. Only the constraining love of Christ and their resultant love for others could have prompted them to toil on or could have sustained them in their diligent and strenuous efforts in the Lord's service. Their love for Christ did not permit them to spare any energies, to succumb to any fatigue or to refuse to make any sacrifice.

True Christian love is always seeking for something it can do for the Lord and for others. Service always follows salvation. Service is the only proof of love. Any professing Christian who refuses to serve his Lord faithfully either does not know the Saviour in the forgiveness of his sins or he has but very little gratitude and love in his heart for Him. Little service is a positive proof of only a little love. Much love for Christ always results in much service. Those who love the Lord and the souls for whom He died will bear all things, face all difficulties and surmount all obstacles to introduce others to Him. The strength of love is tested by its labors. We show our love to Christ by our labors for Him. Love for Christ moves to benevolent exertion and changes drudgery into enjoyment.

A labor of love is a labor which is inspired by love and consists of fatiguing toil. It means that out of love one labors to the point of weariness. Love gives itself unstintingly. Love does not count the cost, but it gladly pays the price. Somebody once said to J. Hudson Taylor, the famous missionary, "You must have made great sacrifices." He replied, "Man, I never made a sacrifice in my life." Love is like that. The deep love in his heart made him unaware of the cost. Is your love for Christ of this truly healthy quality?

II. A Hope That Was Sustaining.

"Your patience of hope." "Patience" may also be rendered "steadfastness." What is meant is not a quiet, passive resignation, but an active constancy

in the face of difficulties. It is the spirit which can bear things, not simply with resignation, but with blazing hope.

The word which is here translated "patience" does not denote a negative and passive resignation to problems or to persecution, but rather a positive and optimistic fortitude in spite of indignities suffered. In the New Testament "patience" is nearly always a specialized word, and stands for endurance. Therefore, the Christian ought to possess a hope of so strong and so definite a character that it brings to him the quality of endurance.

The New Testament word for "hope" does not mean a "perhaps," but a certainty; and, significantly enough, it nearly always refers to the hope of the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The kind of hope that produces patience is a calm, sure and trusting hope. The reason that Christians can have patience in hope is because they are sure that their hope in Christ will be fulfilled. Since this hope is directed toward Christ's return, it is a confident expectation and has an air of certainty about it, and that makes it different from the unfounded optimism which we often mean by the word.

Paul praised God for the persistent and unwavering hope which the Thessalonians possessed. And what was their hope? It was "to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come" (I Thessalonians 1:10). Serving and waiting constitute the divine order in the scheme of Christian living. Some are waiting without serving, while others are working without watching. The expectation which the early Christians possessed was the strength of the service which they rendered. Hope always begets patience. It fosters patience. As long as there is a hope of anything, we think that it is worthwhile waiting for it. But just in proportion as hope fades patience relaxes its hold. Hope justifies patience. If there is nothing to hope for, why wait?

There are three directions in which we greatly need the sustaining which the hope of Christ's return affords us:

1. In maintaining our standards, in spite of temptations.
How Satan does try to lure the Christian to lower his standards! What can keep us steadfastly adhering to our standards? The hope of Christ's return can and will.
2. In keeping our loyalty, in spite of opposition.
There are times when the world, the flesh and the devil seem to conspire together to make us deny or desert the Master. The New Testament Christians were subjected to such assaults repeatedly, and so are we quite frequently. There are very few things calculated to inspire our endurance like the hope of Christ's return.
3. In continuing our service, in spite of discouragement.
The service of our Lord is always beset with difficulties. Satan, who has so much to lose through the earnest work of God's servants, is always busy to prevent it. How, then, shall the grace of continuance be ministered to us? In no way so effectively as by the hope of the return of our Lord. In this connection Paul once said, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (I Corinthians 15:58).

Faith is the commencement of the Christian life; it is seen by its works; and it refers to the past. Love is the continuance and progress of the

spiritual life; it is seen by its self-denying exertion; and it refers to the present. Hope is the completion of the spiritual life; it is seen by its patience and endurance; and it refers to the future.

Our church needs service born of faith, inspired by love and maintained through hope. May all our efforts in Christ's service be characterized by the potency of faith, the fervency of love and the constancy of hope.