STANDING FIRM IN THE FAITH

1 Thessalonians 3:1-4:12
Key Verse: 3:8

“For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.”

Last week, we studied St. Paul’s ministry to the Thessalonians. St. Paul was not married. He had no children. Yet he cared for the Thessalonians like a mother in feeding them the word of God. He disciplined them in the faith like a father disciplining his own children. As a result, the Thessalonian Christians received the word of God as it actually is, the word of God. And they became models of faith, love and endurance to all the churches in Macedonia and Achaia. We learned through this passage that there is a real and everlasting joy for all who teach the Bible as the word of God. Those who teach the Bible before God have many spiritual children as their pride and joy on earth. Those who teach the Bible before God will rejoice eternally when the Lord Jesus comes again to reward them with his glory. As we studied, the Thessalonians’ faith in the word of God brought them new birth, but also made them the targets of persecution from God’s enemies. Paul wrote this letter after hearing that they had stood firm in their faith in spite of severe suffering. In Chapters 3 and 4, Paul writes to tell the Thessalonians that they should expect more persecutions, and that they must grow in their faith and love in order to remain standing firm in the Lord. May God bless us to learn from St. Paul how to stand firm in our faith by living to please God.

FIRST, trials of faith (3:1-5). As we already studied, Paul, Silas and Timothy stayed in Thessalonica for a mere three weeks before they were driven out by troublemakers who were jealous of Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles. They went on to Berea, where they taught the Bible in peace until Jews came again from Thessalonica to stir up trouble. Paul left Silas and Timothy in Macedonia, while he went on to Athens in the Roman province of Achaia. He wanted them to join him as soon as they could. But Paul heard reports that the Thessalonian believers continued to receive persecution for being cult members as followers of Jesus. He sent instructions to Timothy from Athens first to go back to Thessalonica to see about the fledgling ministry that they had established there. Timothy went, and later traveled together with Silas to meet up with Paul in Corinth. Timothy reported to Paul that the Thessalonians had remained faithful and were eager to see Paul again. Look at verses 1 and 2. “So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith.”

Paul was very anxious about the Thessalonian believers because they were facing severe trials comparable to those faced by the Jerusalem church, though they had come to know Jesus after only three weeks of listening to the gospel message. But Paul was not sorry that the Thessalonians had to face such trials. Look at verses 3 and 4. “...so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.” Paul had taught the Thessalonians from the
beginning that they should expect trials and persecutions. Of course, he did not wish such sufferings upon his spiritual children. But he knew that hardships and sufferings are a necessary part of a Christian’s growth in faith. So he taught the Thessalonians to expect such sufferings, and to accept them as part of God’s sovereign will for them. In this way, Paul helped the Thessalonians to have a right attitude toward suffering, so that they would not be unsettled in their faith.

No parent wishes to see his child suffer. They would rather suffer themselves, so that their children might grow in peace and comfort. It is God’s wisdom, however, that through suffering, children learn obedience and compassion for others. One missionary family went to Nigeria to teach Nigerian students the Bible one to one. At first, the missionary worked for the embassy there, and his family lived in the embassy compound, which had air conditioning. When the IMF crisis caused the embassy to cut its staff, the missionary had to choose whether to go back to Korea, or to remain in his mission field. He decided to stay, and moved with his family into the city, where he started up his own business. He was ok. But every night he listened to his children crying because they could not sleep due to the stifling heat and humidity, since there was no air conditioning in his apartment. Because of his children’s crying, he wanted to go back home. But he made a decision to help his children accept this small hardship for the sake of serving God’s sheep in Nigeria. Then his children could understand the meaning of their suffering, and together with their parents, they labored to serve God’s work. Since then the work of God in Nigeria blossomed, and two years ago over 120 students attended their Christmas worship service. Here we learn that our children are not our own. They belong to God, and it is God’s will to train our children to bear up under trials, so that they can bear fruit to God with their lives. This applies all the more to our spiritual children through Bible study. Jesus told his disciples in John 15:18, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.” “I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you.” (John 16:4a)

SECOND. Paul’s prayer (6-13). The Thessalonian church faced a severe test immediately after receiving the gospel message, so that Paul feared that his work among them might have been in vain. Timothy, however, brought to Paul the good news that the Thessalonians had not wavered in their faith because of hard trials. They did not blame Paul for their sudden difficulties, but longed to see him again and spend time with him in Jesus, even as Paul longed to be with them. Look at verses 7 and 8. “Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.” The Thessalonians had faced their trials and overcome them in Jesus. Paul was very happy, like a mother who hears that her son has returned from battle a hero. Their victory was his victory before the throne of God. Paul, however, knew that this was only the first of many battles. Look at verse 10. “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.” Paul considered it an urgent matter that he might continue to support the Thessalonians in their struggle to stand firm in the Lord in spite of hard trials. Though they had stood firm thus far, they were still lacking in faith. In his joy and motherly concern, Paul prays for the Thessalonian believers night and day. We can learn several things about how we must grow in faith from Paul’s prayer.
Firstly, our love should increase and overflow. Look at verse 12. “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.” The goal of Christian fellowship can be expressed in one word: love. On the night Jesus was to be arrested, after being betrayed by his disciple Judas Iscariot, Jesus’ disciples gathered to eat the Passover meal. They were too anxious about their immediate future, and too hungry for the delicious lamb, bread and wine, to care that none of them had washed their feet. So Jesus, knowing that he was about to be betrayed, humbled himself, undressed, and taking a wash basin full of water, began to wash his disciples’ feet one by one. Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, knowing that Judas was going to betray him, and that Peter would deny him three times in the High Priest’s courtyard. Then Jesus told his disciples, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:34,35). In the face of severe trials and a terrible death by crucifixion, Jesus struggled to love all of his disciples by faith. As a result, he could go to the cross willingly, and make God’s love known to all mankind through his sacrifice as the Lamb of God for the sin of the world. Praise Jesus, who showed us the full extent of God’s love. We are hard pressed on every side just to survive in this world. But it is God’s will for us that our love for each other and for all people might increase and overflow, until we can serve all of God’s lost sheep even with our lives.

Secondly, we must grow in holiness. Look at verse 13. “May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.” Holiness is the defining characteristic of our God. Our God is holy. He is perfect in love, in righteousness, truth and justice. There is no darkness in him. To worldly people, the holiness of God is beyond human beings’ capability. But the truth is that every one longs for the holiness of God. Once, there was a Jewish thief who lived in Poland during the time of the Nazi invasion. In order to humiliate and crush the Jews, the Nazis forced all the members of the synagogue to walk past and spit on the Torah, the five books of Moses. All the members spat on the Torah, hoping to save their skins. But the Jewish thief sensed that he was going to meet his Creator soon. He refused to spit on the Torah. Such a despicable person hoped that somehow, he might be able to stand in the presence of the Holy God, and be recognized as his child. Then the Nazis killed all the members, and burned the synagogue. Like the thief, we all know that one day, the only thing that will matter is how the Holy God sees us and our lives. And like the thief, we know that our only hope is to throw ourselves at the mercy of God. The reason that Jesus died on the cross, shedding his precious blood, was so that all who believe in him could be cleansed by God’s grace and made the holy children of God. Everyone who has this hope in God must purify himself (1 Jn 3:3). Only those who have grown in the holiness of God can remain standing until the end.

Third, living to please God (4:1-12). In this chapter, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the sort of life they must lead in order to remain standing firm in their faith. Paul has already given them these commands by the authority of Christ Jesus. They were already struggling to live in obedience to them. But Paul urges, “Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more” (1b). The Thessalonian Christians had made a good beginning. But now they needed to press on by submitting
themselves more and more to the lifestyle to which they were called when they first believed.

Look at verses 3 and 4. “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable.” Here, Paul gives the Thessalonians practical directions on how to grow in the holiness of God. First and foremost, they must learn to control their passions and desires. When God created man and woman, he gave man and woman a blessing to be fruitful and increase in number, and a command to rule over all created things as the steward of God’s creation. Those who cannot bring their passions and desires under spiritual control cannot fulfill their holy mission before God. There is one and only one relationship for which our physical desires are appropriate, and that is between the husband and wife. Godless people reject this truth as the teaching of uptight men. But the Lord will punish men for all such sins. God has called us to live a holy life, under the guidance of his Holy Spirit (8).

Look at verses 9 and 10. “Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.” When we study these verses carefully, we see that Paul is laying down the principle of remaining firm in Christian faith. The Thessalonian believers had already won a great spiritual victory by imitating their shepherds and practicing brotherly love toward all the believers in Macedonia. They stood firm when tested by the persecutions of God’s enemies. They were very good already. But to remain standing in their faith, they had to reach out in love more and more. A strong Christian never says, “I have done enough.” A strong Christian asks, “how far will what I have done go? (Jn 6:8) What more can I do?” In Matthew 5:43,44, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” “Be perfect therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mat 5:48). It is not reasonable for us to love our enemies. It is not reasonable for us to pray for those who hurt us. But it is our God’s command that we must extend the boundaries of our love for others, even as our heavenly Father extended his love to us when we were still in our sins. May God bless you to not to judge yourselves by human standards, but to grow more and more in the holiness and love of God.

Read verses 11 and 12. “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.” A tent-making missionary life is supported on three pillars: love, holiness, and self-sufficiency. When we have these three pillars in balance in our daily life, we can carry out the tent-making ministry of St. Paul, and bear abundant fruit to God with our lives.

In today’s passage we learned that Christians must accept persecutions and trials as God’s discipline for us to grow in faith. In order to please God with our faith, we must overcome our trials by growing in the love and holiness of God. May God bless us to be strong in our faith by growing in love and holiness through serving others in 1 to 1 Bible study.