

1st Thessalonians Ch 3 Vs 3-13

“The Furnace Of Affliction”

James said, “*My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.*” James 1:2 Or “temptations”, various hardships, or “afflictions”, and last week we left off as we were in the flow of the point and purpose of afflictions in the life of the believer. Because one thing is for certain, hardships, and adversities, afflictions, and complexities come into the lives of us all. Difficulties are pre-ordained as a believer, even if you never had any problems or hardships as a non-believer, you will have once you give your life to Christ.

Again so many people miss-lead people, and try and persuade people to giving their lives to Christ by giving them the impression that coming to Christ is synonymous with taking out an insurance policy against suffering or problematic issues in life. But unfortunately that simply isn't true, Jesus said, “*narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.*” Matt 7:14 and We mentioned last week the fact that Jesus *never* guaranteed a life led in comfort to those who followed Him, but He did guarantee difficulties. You remember when Jesus was ministering to the people. Healing the sick, delivering the demon possessed, and there became a great multitude, and so Jesus gave a command to His disciples that they should depart and go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. and A certain scribe shouted, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.*" In other words, “You wanna follow Me? You better count the cost.” Because it's not easy following Jesus, there can be many uncertainties that you're face with regarding your own awareness of how certain scenarios are going to turn out. You're going to be persecuted, made fun of, despised and rejected by the world.

It's true that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and that no one comes to the Father but by Him, but don't be deceived, the pathway to the Father is a difficult one. Why, because men love darkness rather than light, and as you come out of the darkness and into the light, and you begin to reflect the light of Jesus Christ into the darkness of their lives and as your integrity begins to expose their shameful deeds, they'll hate you, and persecution follows.

So don't think it strange when fiery trials come into your life, Paul says in vs 3 here, “*Don't be shaken (or moved) by these afflictions, for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.*” Jesus never tried to lead you to believe anything else, the scriptures are very clear. In the book of Acts ch 14 we find where Paul and the disciples were going throughout the region that they were in strengthening the believers and exhorting them to continue in the faith saying, “*We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.*” Acts 14:22 We might consider them (almost) spiritual contractions as we're being prepared to enter the kingdom of God in the eternal, we so often freak out when trials come into our lives, like we can't believe this is happening to us.

Doesn't God see what's going on? Doesn't He care? But again Jesus set the standard in every area of life, and He said very clearly, *"A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you."* John 15:20 So don't be surprised when as a believer hardships enter your life, rejoice, it testifies of the fact that you're His.

Now if you claim to be a believer and you *never* experience difficult days, then you have reason to be concerned, someone once said something to the effect of, "You have to be going the opposite direction of the devil in order to bump into him." and So as Peter said, (much like James) *"Do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings."*
1 Peter 4:12-13

As we mentioned last week, God wants to conform you into the image of His Son, to purify your faith, but it comes as by fire, the refiners fire. Now personally I would rather sing about it, "Purify my heart, let me be as gold, and precious silver." I'd rather sing it than to actually go through what it really takes to do it, purity of heart takes more than a beautiful melody. Not that there's anything wrong with that song, I personally love that song, because when I sing it, I mean it, I want God to purify me, to refine me, to shape me into a vessel of honor fit for use by the King. But I often don't stop to really sit down and consider what all being refined, and purified might entail for me. But the fact is we're purified by fire, by trials, by tough times, by hardships and difficulties.

But you know the story; it's when you're in the midst of the fiery furnace that Jesus shows up. The "heat" was on in a big way on that day, in that season of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego's lives. They wouldn't bow to the idol of Nebuchadnezzar and because of that they were going have to pay; persecution was coming down the tracks. and Nebuchadnezzar was full of fury that day because he'd threatened them with the fiery furnace and yet they refused to bow to the image or worship any other god, than the God of Israel. and So he commanded the furnace to be heated up some 7 times hotter than it normally was, and he had these men bound and led toward the furnace. and The fire was so hot that the men who were leading them to the furnace to be cast in caught on fire and were burned before they ever even reached the mouth of the furnace, you talk about a fiery trial, even the people around them were suffering just for being somewhat associated with them. and You know what happened, after they'd been cast into the fire, and they were in the very midst of their "fiery trial" Nebuchadnezzar gazed *into* the fire and noticed that they weren't being consumed, as a matter of fact, they were even being singed. and As he peered into the furnace of affliction he took count and there was 1 more in there with them than what he'd commanded to be thrown in, and they were just walking around in there hanging out, and they went in bound but in the fire they were freed. The shackles were burned loose in the heat. He said, *"I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God."* Dan 3:25

The bible says that when he called them out of the fire that the hair of their head wasn't singed, their clothes weren't burned, and they didn't even smell like smoke. and That's the good news, when you're in the fiery trial; Jesus suddenly becomes very real to me. My need *for* Him, to cling *to* Him, not let go *of* Him, Jesus shows up in the furnace of affliction, in a very special and intimate way.

and We read in Isa 43 Where the Lord has said, "*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the LORD your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*" Isa 43:1-3

You might understand it like this, when Jesus is in your boat, no matter how rough the waters might get, you'll always get to the other side, the boat that Jesus is in, doesn't sink, it makes it across to the other side.

Now many people think, and even teach that as believers we shouldn't suffer afflictions, and that God teaches us by means of His Word alone. and Though granted many times we'd avoid certain afflictions that we invite into our lives (by ignoring His Word) if we'd obey His Word, but that doesn't alleviate the clear teaching of the Word of God concerning the fact that God does use afflictions to teach us.

Now, I'm not saying that God causes you to be afflicted, but I am saying that He allows afflictions to come into our lives, and that even our afflictions He'll use to His glory. How, what does God teach us through afflictions? Why do we need afflictions in our lives?

Well, if you're a note taker, probably the 1st thing you'd want to jot down concerning the "Lessons learned through afflictions" is obedience, #1 Obedience, David said in Ps 119:67 "*Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word.*" Until Your chastening hand was upon my life, I just kind of did what I wanted, but now that I've experienced this furnace of affliction I'm going to be obedient. I don't like inviting affliction into my life, but again afflictions don't necessarily mean there's been rebellion in your life, the writer of Hebrews tells us that even Jesus learned obedience through the things He suffered. Again agonizing over the will of God for His life in the garden of Gethsemane to the point of shedding blood, yet He obeyed the Fathers direction for His life. Now if suffering was good enough to teach Jesus, then I don't understand the audacity of some to claim that suffering is the simple result of a lack of faith. These people can't be reading their bibles, they like to camp out on certain texts that make them feel good, and get them lots of money, but again the bible is very clear, as believers we're appointed to afflictions. So #1 *Obedience*. #2 *Perseverance* or patience, again Paul said, "*We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance.*" Rom 5:3 and Then perseverance character, and character hope.

But we learn unswerving endurance through trials as we bear up under them by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

#3 Trials teach us *the faithfulness of God*, and we've sort of touched on that regarding Jesus being with us in them and delivering us through them to the other side, (remember) His boat doesn't sink. Even in all the afflictions that Job experienced, God brought him through them all and blessed him beyond measure in the end, trials teach God's faithfulness. Now granted often times we see His faithfulness in hindsight, but He's there none the less, and our faith is increased as we realize He's never left us nor forsaken us.

and #4 Though there's certainly more and this is what we mentioned in the beginning but, afflictions *conform us into His image*. You remember we were talking about how God wants to conform you into the image of Christ, but it only comes as by fire? Before metals can be formed they have to be softened by fire. I remember as a kid (my dad was big in to spoonbiling) he liked to snag those big fresh water fish down at twin bridges. and Often times before he'd go he'd get these strips of led, because he liked to make his own sinkers. and He place these strips of led into a pot at light a fire under them with an old Coleman camping stove. and As the pot would get real hot the lead would begin to melt and as it melted all this slag and dross and things, these impurities would float to the top and he's skim them off the top and dispose of them and then he'd pour the metal into the mold and it would then cool and take the shape of the mold (in this case a sinker). But sometimes when he'd open the mold, maybe eye of the sinker would break off, or something didn't take just right, that was no problem, back into the pot it would go to be softened again and be re-poured the next time with success.

That's what God does with us, He places us in the kettle or the pot, and then the heat starts to come and we soften and all these shackles or impurities and dross starts floating up and He scrapes those things off and discards them. He purifies us, and pours us into the mold of His Son, and if it don't take just right, that's no problem, back into the refiners pot we go until we fit the mold. The furnace of afflictions conform us into the image of Jesus Christ

They bring us into what God's called us to be; you've maybe heard me talk about the process of the Butterfly coming out of its cocoon before. Part of the process is the difficulties of coming out, if you go and cut the cocoon open feeling sorry for the little struggling butterfly, you'll kill it. Because it needs to struggle and strain, and experience the pressures of leaving the cocoon in order to press the blood out into it's wings so that it can take shape, it's necessary exercise.

In the same way, if we're to become what God has called us to be, it's necessary that we experience the struggles, strains and pressures of life in order that we might take shape, lest we die taking the easy way out. God gives us what we need, not always that which is easy, sometimes the path of least resistance is the pathway of death, Jesus called it the broad path.

The other thing, is that He wants to unleash the resurrection power of Christ upon our lives. But we can't know the power of the resurrection until we've 1st experienced the fellowship of His sufferings, we have to die before we can experience the resurrection. Paul said that the aim of his life was that he might "*know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*" The power of the resurrection can't be a reality in our lives until the flesh has been crucified and put to death; the furnace of afflictions is death to the flesh. The primary symbol of the Christian faith is a cross, the cross speaks of suffering, it speaks of affliction, we're appointed to afflictions, but on the other side of death is the resurrection, but understand the means to that end is affliction.

Vs4

Paul prophesied to them that persecution would follow him, he knew that, how? Because Paul was called to a specific "ministry" so to speak of suffering, Jesus told Ananias that He would show him how many things he *must* suffer for His names sake. Now to me that doesn't seem like a real desirable way to recruit people into the ministry, "Join my team, lead a life of suffering and misery." You know we so often try to explain the bright side of the ministry, sharing the gospel, seeing lives change, and laying up eternal rewards, and all that's true. But Jesus didn't use that approach, He said, count the cost, it's a rough, rough, road, but compared to the weight of glory that's to be revealed in you on that day, it's light.

Vs 5

Who's the tempter? Satan, how does he tempt us to throw in the towel, the list could go on and on, through the lusts of the flesh, carnal ambitions, materialism, things like doubt, or despondency and despair, he tries to get you introverted and concerned only with yourself and what you're going through, feeling sorry for yourself. Rather than being concerned for others, and serving them and looking to bless them, one of the best defenses against depression is to serve someone else, get your mind off yourself and bless someone else. Remember Christ, Paul, Timothy, and many others, they were others oriented. Paul was going through more than what many of us ever will, but he didn't focus on that, he let his concern be taken by the welfare of others. Now in this context the tempter was tempting them through persecution, to say, "If this is what it means to follow Christ, count me out."

If the Thessalonians were to waver in their faith, Paul would've considered his work among them to have been *in vain*. In the parable of the soils (Matthew 13:1-23), Jesus described the seed that was sown on stony ground which withered under the heat of the day. Later He went on to define that aspect of the seeds that were sown as the one's who heard the Word, received it, but because they had no root in them, when trials and persecutions came because of the Word, immediately they stumbled.

If the Thessalonians withered, Paul's hard work as a farmer among them would have born no harvest. It would've been pointless, so what did he do to help ensure that that wouldn't happen? He sent them Timothy, because it's important that those who are in the furnace of affliction have other godly people around them who can help establish them or stay them up and encourage them in that way, the way of God's Word, and faithfulness to Him.

Vs 6

The report of Timothy to Paul was 3-fold, he spoke of their faith, and love, and their good remembrance of Paul, they were standing in the fire, they weren't buying the lies of the enemy. and We spoke in ch 1 about their faith and love.

Vs7-8

You see there it is, Paul was distressed, Paul was afflicted, but it wasn't someone catering to him that lifted his head and gave him comfort, it was the news that others were doing well and following God with their whole hearts. Vs 8 is saying that now we're completely satisfied, our lives are fulfilled in your standing fast in the faith. The apostle John would put it like this, "*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.*" 3 John 4 Kids listen up, I'm going to save you lots of money today (or maybe next month if you've already bought your mom something.) The best gift you could ever get your mom for mother's day, or your dad for father's day is simply a little note that says, "Mom, I've purposed in my heart that I'm going to walk in truth, I'm going to follow hard after God's direction in my life being an individual of integrity and uprightness of heart. Love" and fill in the blank. They'll have no greater joy than to see you walk rightly before God.

Vs9-10

Again I want to draw attention here to Paul's prayer life, he was a man who was always on his knees, he never had idle time. He took advantage of sleepless nights. Not by reading the paper or seeing what was on TV but by praying, seeking the heart and mind of God. and Praying that God would make a way for him to share the gospel, or encourage others or that others would grow in spiritual wisdom and understanding in the knowledge of God's will.

In this case he wanted to be sent back to them so that he might perfect, or complete what was lacking in their faith. The word "Perfect" here carries the idea of equipping, it's the same root word that Paul used when he wrote the Ephesians concerning the role of Pastor teachers, and evangelists and all and he said that they were placed in the body of Christ for the "equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry." It's a word that was used regarding the mending of nets, making things so that they function fully as they were intended. We have to remember that Paul was only with them for 3 weeks or so. There was still plenty he wanted to set in order, personal purity, the miss-understandings as to the nearness of Christ's coming, no doubt he wanted to expound on all the things he only touched on in this letter. In short he wanted to give them the pastoral care that they needed, he wanted to help bring them into maturity. and This was Paul's prayer

Vs11-13

That God would make them a way to get back to them, and that He would cause them to increase and abound in love (that is agape') toward one another and to all, in other words love that abounds knows no bounds. and That God might establish their hearts (because God is always looking to our hearts) blameless in holiness. and We looked at that word "establish" last week, that He might stay them up and keep them from wavering in holiness. That they would be stable concerning holiness, which speaks of that sanctification, being set apart from the world unto the Lord. and Of course the soon return of the Lord is to be that which acts like a catalyst, spurring us on to holiness.

Because we don't know what hour the master of the house is returning, and so we want to be found doing what we've been called to do when He returns lest we receive our portion with the wicked. But what I want to draw your attention to here before we close is vs 12 (we'll spend significant time on the coming of the Lord in ch 4). Paul has commended them over and over for their love, but here he says, it still needs to increase, when it comes to the love of God pouring through your life, you'll never arrive on this side of eternity to the place you need to be. In other words the Lord is saying, don't get too comfortable, don't start looking around at your life and saying, "You know, I'm doing alright." and We get comfortable, and apathy begins to creep into our hearts as we take life easy and just sort of slip *in cruise* mode. But the Lord would say, "Don't get *in cruise* continue to *increase*" Increase in Love, "I rejoice in what's happening in your life but may it continue to increase in an ever abounding measure."

How does that happen? Well guys, it takes us back to that breaking down and pouring out concept. In Jer 48 God said concerning Moab, "Moab has been at ease from his youth; He has settled on his dregs, And has not been emptied from vessel to vessel." Jer 48:11 God said, I'm going to have to shake Moab up a bit, pour him from vessel to vessel because he's settled in his lees, in the dregs, he's in cruise.

You see in bible days the wine maker would gather the grapes, place them in the vat and stomp out the juices. Then they would pour the juices into these vessels, and as the wine would begin to settle, and all the impurities and the dregs would begin to settle in toward the bottom, at the right time the wine maker would come along and pour the wine out into a new vessel. and I have no doubt that the whine, was wining about it, it was a real dreg for the wine, because things were just settling in and "boom" it was poured out. and This would happen again and again some 5-6 times. and If the wine wasn't poured at the right time, it would begin to take on the flavor of these dregs and impurities, it was a purification process, it made fine wine. and So just as you begin to get settled in life, things begin to get easy and you start settling in and "Boom" along comes the wine maker and you lose your job, you get placed on the bench, or your boyfriend or girlfriend tells you to hit the road. and You're just being poured from vessel to vessel, from faith to faith, not being able to get too comfortable in that vessel. Because just when you're settling in, thinking, "Man I'm glad that's over, wouldn't want to go through that again" the Lord comes along and pours you out, and suddenly you're all stirred up, you're all agitated.

Again it's a real dreg, but what's happening, he's purifying you, causing you to increase in that which is pure. So if you've been at ease, and have begun to settle in your lees, you can know that a pouring is heading your way.

But too often if you're anything like me you get a serious case of the "Poor me's". To my own shame my cry is too often not p-o-u-r me it's p-o-o-r me. I was just getting cozy and comfy and this pouring comes along. Because God heard that prayer that you prayed when you said, "Father make me a man of God, make me a woman of God, use my life, Father don't let me have a beggarly entrance into you kingdom, but may I have an abundant entrance. I want my life to count" and God said, "That's so great, but if you're to have the wine of My Spirit flowing through you, I need to refine you. and There will be regular seasons where you will be poured." "Because if not you'll settle in the dregs, and take on the flavor of the impurities, but I love you too much for that, I want you sparkly and bubbly, full of Joy and pure." So my prayer for us this morning is that we would learn the lesson of embracing the furnace of affliction, that we would take to heart and place into practice the value of not saying, "Poor me, father can't you help me here." But rather, "Father help me out here, pour me, pour me."

Today if you're here and you don't know the Lord, I'm not going to lie to you, the narrow path isn't the easy one, but it's full of joy unspeakable and full of glory. and If you're tired of the emptiness and struggles of leading this life apart from Christ and you're ready to be refined by God, I'm going to invite you to receive Christ today.