

The Advent of the Lord

August 23rd, 2015, Gospel Meeting, Miyota
Gotthold Beck

主の再臨

2015年8月23日、御代田福音集会
ゴットホルド・ベック

1 Thessalonians

3:1 Therefore, when we could stand it no longer, we decided to remain alone in Athens
3:2 and send Timothy, our brother who works with us for God in the gospel of the Messiah, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith,
3:3 so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions, for which you are aware that we were destined.
3:4 In fact, when we were with you, we told you ahead of time that we were going to suffer persecution. And as you know, that is what happened.
3:5 But when I could stand it no longer, I sent Timothy to find out about your faith. I was afraid that the tempter had tempted you in some way, and that our work had been a waste of time.
3:6 But Timothy has just now returned from visiting you and has told us the good news about your faith and love. He also told us that you always have fond memories of us and want to see us, just as we want to see you.
3:7 That's why, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you by your faith.
3:8 For now we can go on living, as long as you continue to stand firm in the Lord.
3:9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we have in God's presence because of you?
3:10 We pray very hard night and day that we may see you again face to face, so that we may equip you with whatever is lacking in your faith.
3:11 Now may our God and Father and our Lord Jesus provide a way for us to visit you.
3:12 May the Lord greatly increase your love for each other and for all people, just as we love you.
3:13 Then your hearts will be strong, blameless, and holy in the presence of God, who is our Father, when our Lord Jesus appears with all his saints.

[International Standard Version]

Every time before I begin preaching, I always pray a peculiar prayer like this; "Jesus, please have mercy on me. Please do not let the audience listen to what I am going to say but help them understand what you want to tell them through me. Please let them prepare their minds for that."

After all, our only hope is that the Holy Spirit is there

tShikai <Shikai>o reveal the glory of the Lord. The letter we just read was the very first letter Paul wrote. It was presumably written around the year 50 A.D. in Corinth.

As an outcome of Paul's work of introducing Jesus on three Sabbaths, many people were led to the belief and were saved. Their sincere faith and true love became the reason for Paul to be so grateful to the Lord.

It is written that, where his word is proclaimed, the Lord will come and work. This first epistle to Thessalonians, besides being the very first letter Paul wrote, is an extremely valuable letter.

We can see from the first chapter of this letter that the church in Thessaloniki started as a wonderful assembly of believers. When they heard of the gospel of Jesus, who was crucified and then resurrected, they accepted it instantly and were filled with great joy.

They did not merely understand the word of the Lord in their heads but they let it come into their hungry and thirsty hearts and then consumed it. It is not until we accept his word deep in our hearts and taste it enough that the great strength of the Lord begins to work on us.

We have learned from chapter 2 that the service of Paul and his co-workers was so sincere that it was not wasted meaninglessly. Those who were led to the belief in Thessaloniki became model believers for people in Macedonia and Achaia. The Bible states that it was like a light that guided them.

However, we should not be satisfied with having a great start like this but need to put more importance on further growth of our faith. Although, it surely is a great joy for anyone to have a child, if the child does not grow at all, it will become nothing but a source of pain.

Likewise, for all sinners, it must be the most wonderful thing in the world to accept Jesus as their savior and to be born into a new life. However, if the saved ones eventually come to a compromise and fall into the trap of the devil, it will cause great grief to the Lord.

Needless to say, unless something is born and comes out into the world, there is no chance for that something to grow. Many people claim themselves as believers, but they often fail to pay enough attention to the fact that if their lives of faith did not start in the right way, it would never be followed by the right growth.

If their lives as believers do not start in the right way, they may have to remain in the same state, or in the

worse case, may retreat to the previous state. Furthermore, we need to be more careful because even if our life of faith started in the right way, it does not always guarantee the right growth of our faith.

How were the believers in Thessaloniki in this regard? The answer is given in chapter 3. How can we title this chapter? What title best suits chapter 3? I can think of some titles, including "Good Faith," "By Faith," "Nevertheless," "Examine!" or "Blessing through the Suffering."

The chapter 3 can be divided into three parts: Verses 1 and 2 are about the cooperation in their service to the Lord. Verses 3 to 8 describe the ordeals and sufferings that accompanied their service. And verses 9 to 13 revolve around the joy of fellowship in their service. Let us discuss this chapter in these three parts.

The word that appears most frequently in chapter 3 is, needless to say, 'faith'. Let us look up this word in this chapter. It can be seen in many verses, including verse 2, "to strengthen and encourage you in your faith," verse 5, "to find out about your faith," verse 6, "Timothy has told us the good news about your faith," verse 7, "we have been encouraged about you by your faith," and verse 10, "we may equip you with whatever is lacking in your faith."

To believe in Jesus is to be always connected with him. This is exactly what Paul wanted them to be. It was the heartfelt desire of Paul that believers in Thessaloniki were always connected with Jesus. When Paul heard from Timothy that they actually were, he felt great relief and consolation.

We can clearly see from this chapter, how Paul brought believers into the hands of Jesus. Furthermore, this chapter also shows us how the believers who were already caught in the hands of Jesus continued to grow by the guidance of God.

What is faith? When we try to find an answer to this question, I guess chapter 11 of Hebrews comes to the mind of many people.

Hebrews

11:1 Now faith is the assurance that what we hope for will come about and the certainty that what we cannot see exists.

According to this verse, there are two sides of faith. That is to say, to begin with, faith is to understand what the eye cannot see. On the other hand, it is related to knowing what will happen in the future.

Thus, the word 'faith' can be replaced by other words such as 'conviction', 'reliance', 'hope' or 'wish'. In actuality, it refers to a series of experiences that begins with an encounter with Jesus, relying on him,

then surrendering yourselves to Jesus.

The foundation of true faith is the fact that Jesus, who was crucified and then resurrected, will one day come back again. Faith is nothing but the fellowship or connection with Jesus. Believers love Jesus, although they do not see him and are eagerly waiting for his return. He might come today.

The largest concern Paul had for the believers in Thessaloniki was whether they would be able to maintain their faith firmly or not. That is to say, Paul was not absolutely convinced that they would continue looking up to Jesus, who could not be seen through the eyes but would absolutely return, and that they would keep living in vibrant fellowship with the Lord.

Because of this, Paul desperately desired to know whether the faith among the believers in Thessaloniki was truly immovable. He did not easily believe that the church in Thessaloniki was absolutely stable. Instead, he kept caring about the believers in there and always worried about how they were doing.

However, the faith of Paul beat his own anxiety and worry. The eyes of Paul were fixed on the sincerity and unimaginable grace of the Lord that would overcome the weakness and agonies of the believers.

Because of his great love and concern for the brothers and sisters in Thessaloniki, Paul gave up working with Timothy for the believers in Corinth and Athens, and finally decided to dispatch Timothy to Thessaloniki.

There is another question. What kind of danger threatened the life and faith of believers in there?" There are so many things in our lives that may possibly spoil our fellowship with Jesus. As explained in verse 3, Paul sent his co-worker, Timothy, in order to encourage them so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions.

If we do not keep looking up to Jesus, we fall into a danger of losing sight of him. When we lose sight of Jesus, our faith is devastated. It is not so rare for believers to fall into such danger through various ordeals, which eventually separate them from intimate fellowship with Jesus. As we can see from verse 5, Paul was afraid that the tempter had come to tempt them in some way.

If, through ordeals, we lose sight of Jesus, we give the tempter (the devil) a chance to come inside and break down the foundation of our belief. If we stop looking up to Jesus, we will be controlled by the will of the devil.

Paul wholeheartedly worried about the brothers and sisters in Thessaloniki. It can be seen from this expression he repeated in verses 1 and 5; "We (I) could stand it no longer."

It was because when the assembly in Thessaloniki was in danger, the faith of Paul and his co-workers would fall into the same danger, while if they stand firm in the Lord, Paul would live too. It is explained in the verse 8.

Thus, if this assembly was to fall apart, it meant the death of Paul too. However, when he heard that they kept standing firm in Jesus, Paul felt very vibrant and lively with them.

When other brothers or sisters suffer, do we feel the same pain? What about yourself? Once Cain said to the Lord, "Am I my brother's guardian?" Today, so many people still take the attitude Cain took, don't they? This is exactly the mindset of murderers.

When one of our brothers or sisters commit sin and you act as if it has nothing to do with you, it is exactly the same attitude Cain took.

Paul was tightly connected with the assembly in Thessaloniki. They were as one body and nothing could split them apart. For this reason, when they stood firm in the Lord, Paul was also filled with joy and had a vibrant faith; and when their faith was shaken and withering away, Paul too felt the pain.

Let us look at another question. It is a question about how Paul warned them of the danger their faith was facing.

We can see from verse 4 that Paul predicted in advance that they would eventually have to suffer persecutions. Paul stated that to obey Jesus meant to bear the cross and, it would make it inevitable for them to go through various ordeals and suffer in tribulations.

However, he did not just warn them but he also explained to them, the reasons why they had to face the ordeals.

The first reason was that all believers were sort of aliens in this world after all. Because they were foreigners or travelers and their goal was not in this world but in heaven, as far as they refuse to compromise, their lives cannot help but be accompanied by pain.

Secondly, it is through nothing other than such ordeals that our faith is purified and strengthened. For example, gold is refined at 1000 degrees Celsius. Our faith is compared to gold in the Bible. Let us look at this verse from the First Epistle of Peter, chapter 1.

1 Peter
1:7 so that your genuine faith, which is more valuable than gold that perishes when tested by fire.

If there is no persecution, our faith has no chance of being tested and therefore, we have no chance of spiritual growth. It was for this reason that Paul wrote that he even boasted of our sufferings (Romans 5:3). Paul strengthened the faith of other believers and encouraged them. And as it is written in here, Paul prayed very hard so that he may equip them with whatever was lacking in their faith.

Paul never offered an empty word of consolation or tried to calm them down with some dishonest or untrue words. He explained to them that it was absolutely inevitable for them to go through so many ordeals in order for them to grow as believers. The heartfelt wish of Paul was that the faith of believers be strengthened after they encountered Jesus and even grow further.

What was special about the life of Paul was that he did not care about himself at all, and instead, only wished for the blessing of his fellow believers. What about us in this regard? What kind of attitude are we showing toward other believers?

Let us move to the next question. It revolves around what Paul knew about this church.

It can be seen from verse 6 that Timothy brought good news to him. Timothy told Paul about the faith and love people still had in the church of Thessaloniki. Timothy witnessed with his own eyes how believers in Thessaloniki were connected firmly with the Lord through their faith.

They did not gather to form a religious organization, but had grown a vibrant fellowship with Jesus among them. And it was nothing but their love that formed this spontaneous fellowship.

The verse 8 tells us that they stood firm in the Lord. However, today many believers do not seem to be standing as firm as they did; instead they are always feeling uncertain about their faith, aren't they?

However, no one can stand firm by their own strength. It is only possible when they are in Jesus. Thus, to stand firm in the Lord is to abandon all meaningless effort of your own, to entrust everything to Jesus and to surrender to him.

When Paul heard in detail how the people were doing in Thessaloniki, he was filled with great joy and was compelled to pray in gratitude. However, Paul was neither satisfied with their current state nor concluded that his service for the Lord was

complete, instead, he looked up to even higher goals and began to pursue them.

End

We actually do not necessarily need to go through battles to obtain a new life. Battles that we have to fight for the growth of our faith after we become believers are far harder and much more fierce. Paul expressed in his prayers what he wanted all believers to do, the goal he wanted them to reach.

What was Paul concerned about most for the believers? What was it that he wanted them to do? As we can see from verse 10, he desired to equip them with whatever was lacking in their faith in order to let them have an absolute faith. It was for this purpose that Paul prayed so hard to the Lord to richly increase his love.

At the same time, Paul prayed wholeheartedly to the Lord to make their hearts strong, blameless, and holy (verse 13). Moreover, according to verse 10, Paul kept praying very hard night and day and continued to plead for his help. It is beyond our imagination how seriously Paul cared about his fellow believers and how deeply he worried about them.

That is to say, the Bible tells us how hard Paul prayed day and night for all believers and did not care about his own ordeals or sufferings. As an answer to such sincere prayers of Paul, the Lord blessed the church in Thessaloniki abundantly.

What is required of us today is that, just like Paul did, we pray as hard as possible, not only for ourselves, but for all brothers and sisters and put all our strength into such prayers, isn't it?

The Lord is looking for such people. The Lord wants to use them as a good channel through which he blesses all believers. In this sense, we all should ask the Lord to use us at his will.

I will finish this sermon with these two verses from the First Epistle of Peter, chapter 1.

1 Peter

1:7 so that your genuine faith, which is more valuable than gold that perishes when tested by fire, may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus, the Messiah, is revealed.

1:8 Though you have not seen him, you love him. And even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.

Paul could express his feeling this way to the believers of those days. It would be truly a wonderful blessing if the Lord still has exactly the same feeling for us.