

Remaining United in a Trial of Faith

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The church in Thessalonica was born in persecution. The Gospel had forced people in this town to make a choice. Some Jews and Greeks obeyed the Gospel. The majority, though, violently reacted against the message preached by Paul and Silas. Paul was whisked out of town for the sake of his life. He went to Athens, while the new Christians in Thessalonica stayed. Thessalonica was their home. They had to endure persecution in the early days of their faith.

Eventually, Paul wrote at least two letters to this young church. He was deeply concerned for them. He was worried that the persecution would destroy their faith. In his first letter to the Thessalonian church, he offered words of instruction and encouragement.

Today, we have been facing a trial as a congregation. Thankfully, we have not been persecuted like our former brethren. But, we have been facing a different trial: a pandemic. While the specific circumstances are different, 1 Thessalonians chapter five offers insight into how we can remain united in a trial of faith.

Remaining United Requires Saints to be...

1. Sober-minded (1 Thess. 5:1-8). Paul began, “Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you” (1 Thess. 5:1). The “times and seasons” is a reference to God’s redemptive timeline. God had sent the Savior to the world. The Savior had been crucified and raised from the dead. Now, the world was/is awaiting the return of the Savior.

Knowledge of the Savior’s return was intended to give saints a sense of urgency to prepare themselves for His arrival. While this church had questions regarding the Savior’s return, they understood their need to be ready.

Likewise, we need to be aware of the times in which we are living. Like these brethren, we await the return of the Savior. In the meantime, we must be alert to the efforts of Satan to harm us. The pandemic has created opportunities for Satan to discourage our faith and disrupt our unity. We must guard ourselves against him with faith, love, and hope: “...let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation” (1 Thess. 5:8).

2. Sustained by the knowledge of God’s grace (1 Thess. 1:9-10). Persecution can cause saints to question God’s purposes. Paul recognized the need for the saints at Thessalonica to be reassured of God’s grace. God’s grace was not in question. Paul wrote, “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him” (1 Thess. 5:9-10).

Trials can cause us to question God’s plans. This is a natural response to adversity. Yet, the answer to our questions is found in God’s unchanging grace. God does not offer us salvation

so He can mark us for destruction. His love for us is undiminished by what we experience in life. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:31-39). Dealing with the difficulties of life is inescapable; however, they can cause us to grow in our love for God's grace.

3. Encouraged by one another (1 Thess. 5:11-14). People respond differently to trials. In the local church, the diversity of responses can become harmful to the group's unity. Pressure is stressful. Increased pressure over time can cause an explosion. This is disastrous. How can a church remain united during a trial? By saints encouraging one another.

Encouraging one another is more than a general admonition. Paul gave two specific examples of how we are to encourage one another. If we follow his guidance, we will remain united no matter what we face as a congregation.

First, we encourage one another by honoring the eldership. Paul wrote, "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves" (1 Thess. 5:12-13).

The eldership has a difficult work. They are to lead a group of Christians. They are to help them grow in Christ. They are accountable to God for the quality of service they render. Yet, Paul gives instructions, not to the eldership, but the members.

Paul was aware of the challenges elderships have in their work. Surely, the eldership in Thessalonica was making difficult decisions for the church about the persecution. The saints at Thessalonica could encourage their eldership by obedience. Or, they could criticize, complain, and disintegrate.

As saints, we must be keenly aware of our relationship to our eldership. If we have concerns or questions about decisions they make, we can speak with them privately. Elders are to be approachable. However, if we choose to express our displeasure with their decisions to other saints in the congregation, we sow discord. We live in a culture where this type of action is common and encouraged. However, it serves no godly purpose. The proper dynamic between an eldership and the members will produce stability in a trial.

Second, we encourage one another by attending to the needs of other saints. Paul wrote, "And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thess. 5:14).

Hard times affect different people differently. This certainly has proven true in the pandemic. If some have become idle in their faith, admonish them. If some are faint-hearted, encourage them. If some are weak, help them. Regardless of the person, we must always be patient. Encouragement will strengthen our unity in a trial.

Conclusion

The pandemic has been difficult on us for reasons all too familiar. Some continue to be fearful. Some have become weak in faith. Some have become frustrated and angry. Some have matured in surprising ways. As we continue to endure the pandemic, we must remember that we are not the first of the Lord's people to endure a trial that has produced a wide spectrum of opinions about how to cope.

We can use a passage like 1 Thessalonians chapter five to give us wisdom in how to proceed. Or, we can disregard God's word. We can break apart or pull together. We can criticize or support. These were the decisions the saints at Thessalonica were making. These are the decisions we have to make at Fry road.