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By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
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Let's Begin

What do we mean when we say, "a church has a great program"? What is a church program supposed to do? Are there criteria which exist to determine the effectiveness of "church programs"?

One key to understanding the Biblical purpose of the church's existence is found in a phrase in chapter three. It occurs in some form in several verses. For example, Paul writes, "And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellow labourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith" (v. 2; cp. vv. 5-7, 10). Note Paul's express concern is about "your faith." Hence, we could rightly conclude a church only has a great program when the church focuses on developing our faith.

Indeed an adequate program will help members grow in their faith (cp. v. 8). Evangelism is spreading abroad your faith; sharing your faith with others. Edification is being built up in your faith (Jude 20). Whatever else a church does, it must do this.

As we study chapter three, let's follow the simple outline below:

- I. Paul Mentions Elements Which Block the Development of Our Faith (vv. 1-4; cp. 10)**
- II. Paul Mentions Elements Which Benefit the Development of Our Faith (vv. 5-13; cp. v. 1)**

I. Paul Mentions Elements Which Block the Development of Our Faith (vv. 1-4; cp. 10)

Faith's development is not automatic. Think of faith as analogous to a newborn child. Without the constant nurture of the baby's mother, the newborn's growth will be stunted; the child's development will falter, and, in the physical case of a newborn, the child will wither and die. While persons who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ have the undying promise of eternal life, nevertheless, our spiritual life is susceptible to a stunted development without the much needed spiritual nurture.

Paul places great emphasis on spiritual development. In this chapter, we first note the hindrances to spiritual development. Or, to put it in the form of a question, "Are there any elements which may block the development of our faith?" Paul answers with a resounding yes! There are three elements which block faith's development.

Paul places great emphasis on spiritual development.

The first element that blocks the development of faith is suffering. The Apostle writes, "Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone; And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith: That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto. For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know" (vv. 1-4).

Note Paul's specific purpose: that no man should be *moved* by these afflictions. The term translated "moved" was often used in mundane conversation. For example, it was used of a dog wagging its tail. The point is that of rhythmic excitement without thought. In other words as a dog wags its tail uncontrollably, Paul's concern is the Thessalonians not allow afflictions to jerk them uncontrollably back and forth.



Reflection Connection

Is it your practice to look for purpose and meaning in the things you suffer? Do you think the average response to suffering is negative? Why or why not?

Additionally, the Greek term translated “afflictions” is *thlipsis*, which primarily means “to press,” “to pressure,” “to crush,” and/or “to squeeze.” Jesus spoke of the travail a woman experiences during child birth as *thlipsis*: “A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world” (John 16:21). Jesus uses the same word translated “anguish” as did Paul for “afflictions.” Paul feared lest the things they would suffer might cause them to be shaken in their faith.

Suffering is part of God’s maturity program for His children. We see this clearly in other parts of the Scripture. For example, Luke writes, “Confirming the souls of the disciples, *and* exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Indeed some qualities of character can be only brought about by affliction (cp. 2 Cor. 1:4). Suffering can block a person’s faith if he or she allows it. Every believer can know, however, that no suffering God allows is designed to make us stumble or fall. Someone said it best:

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suffering can make you *bitter* or it can make you *better*. Everything the child of God faces has the potential to make him or her better.

The second element which block’s the development of faith is Satan. Observe Paul’s words carefully, “For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain” (v. 5). Polls consistently show most *Americans* do not believe in a personal devil. More alarming is, polls confirm that most *Christians* do not even believe in a personal devil! Jesus had no difficulty affirming the demonic. Nor did the Apostle Paul have reservations about the devil’s existence; he simply followed the precedent of the Lord Jesus. Hence, exactly how professing, Bible-believing Christians today reject the clear affirmations of the Lord is an unsolved paradox.

Note Paul’s words again, “lest by some means the tempter have tempted you.” Satan tempts us to hinder our growth in faith. Understand: the devil cannot get our soul. Being so, he will try to keep us from being mature in the faith. His strategies are designed to hinder our testimony. The Greek term translated “tempter” is *peirāsō*, and it means “to examine,” “to submit another to a test,” or “to learn the true nature of.” In addition, we must understand that only the devil himself ever tempts us to do evil. Hear the Apostle James, “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man” (James 1:13). The term James employs for “tempted” is the very one Paul uses. The point is, God never puts us on trial to bring out the bad in us. Nevertheless, that is precisely what Satan does to the believer. He tempts us always to bring out the fleshly nature.

The third element that blocks the development of faith is short-comings. Before leaving the elements that block the development of our faith, let us note another hindrance Paul reveals later in the chapter at the end of his rhetorical



question, “Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith?” (v. 10). Paul uses the term translated “lacking” which basically carries with it the idea of deficiency. In other words, there are some things which can be added to faith (cp. 2 Peter 1:5-8). Furthermore, the term translated “perfect” literally means “to mend” or “to repair.” His point is, what is added to faith renders faith complete, similar to fully equipping an office (cf. Eph. 4:12)

II. Paul Mentions Elements Which Benefit the Development of Our Faith (vv. 5-13; cp. v. 1)

Now that we have explored the elements that block faith’s development, let us observe the elements which benefit faith’s development. Paul gives two essential ingredients of an adequate church “faith building” program.

First, a powerful preacher was sent to them. The first non-negotiable ingredient for a faith-building program in a New Testament church is a godly, Spirit-filled, Bible-believing pastor-preacher. Paul is quick to point out to the Thessalonians God had graced them with human instruments unparalleled in the ancient church. Recall his words at the beginning of the chapter, “Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone; And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith” (vv. 1-2). Young Timothy was sent to them as God’s emissary, a “minister of God” to bless His people. God uses men to help Christians grow in their faith (Eph. 4:11-13).

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Two clear characteristics defined Timothy’s role for the people of God. *First, Timothy was a man of God.* According to Paul, he was our “brother.” In other words, Timothy was a born again man. No man could be useful to God’s Kingdom who is not born for the Kingdom (cp. John 3:3; 5). In addition, Timothy was a “minister” (i.e. a servant) of God to the people. Hence, Timothy would be primarily concerned with speaking God’s Word. Week in and week out the man sent from God expounds the Scriptures. He does not get his sermons from the headlines of the newspaper or the latest best seller. Rather the Word of God defines the message he preaches. While understanding the times remains necessary for relevant application of God’s truth, the man of God knows he must first understand what God said in Scripture before he can rightly apply His Word to today’s world.

Not only was Timothy a “brother,” and a “minister,” he was also a “fellowlabourer.” He worked hard in God’s work. The greatest blessing a church can have for their faith-building program is a hard-working pastor preacher who feeds God’s flock weekly from the rich pastures of God’s Word.



Second, Timothy had a clearly defined responsibility. Paul continues, “But now when Timotheus came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith and charity, and that ye have good remembrance of us always, desiring greatly to see us, as we also to see you: Therefore, brethren, we were comforted over you in all our affliction and distress by your faith: For now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God” (vv. 6-9). Paul’s obvious concern centered on the reality that the Thessalonians stood “fast in the Lord.”

How could they be forged in their faith? More than anything else, what would anchor their faith solidly in Christ? The clear answer is through the preaching of the Word of God. Preaching is the only way to build a strong, New Testament church. Christians grow as they feed on the Word (cp. Acts 20:32). Crowds may be assembled by other means; but faith cannot grow apart from the Word of God (cp. Rom. 10:17). God’s Word encourages us, or as Paul says, the Word “comforts” us. When we come to church, hear the Word, we gain new courage along with a refreshing hope to keep on being faithful to the Lord.

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Reflection Connection

On a scale of 1 to 10—with 1 the lowest and 10 the highest—what would accurately reflect the passion for prayer you possess in your spiritual life? Use the same scale and gauge the prayer life of your church.

Second, passionate prayer was offered for them. Note the Apostle’s words, “Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints” (vv. 11-13). Observe what a significant part prayer played in Paul’s faith-building ministry. Prayer is heaven’s way “to establish” and “to strengthen” God’s people. Paul saturated his apostolic ministry with prayer for believers. Prayer made them firm in faith.

Indeed prayer is a key ingredient in the spiritual life of every congregation. The pastor must spend time in prayer for the needs of the congregation. Members must take time to pray for the welfare of the church. Do you take it seriously when people ask you to pray for them? We are no stronger than our prayers. In fact, prayer for God’s church and the preaching of God’s Word remain the two non-negotiable ingredients for a faith-building church.

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Golden Greek Nugget

Paul's insistence on love remaining the chief characteristic which defines the church's fellowship is clearly portrayed in verse 12, "And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all *men*, even as we *do* toward you." Note the two terms translated "increase" and "abound," the Greek words being *pleonazo* and *perisseuo* respectively. Both terms carry the idea of supra-abundance; that is, having more than enough, a running over. It is as if Paul is being redundant in what he writes. However, rather than redundancy, it is Paul's way of drilling deeply into the Thessalonians' hearts (and ours) God's truth about love defining the relationship all believers have toward one another.

Wrap Up

Paul gives us a clear picture of a balanced church program. Two elements are necessary: the Word of God and prayer. With today's focus on every latest gimmick to entice people to come to church, it remains very easy to get out of balance. And, too many churches exist which are completely out of balance. They seem to wobble along as if they were running on a flat tire! Some of them have correct Bible-doctrine, but because they neglect prayer, little, if any, spiritual power is experienced. On the other hand, if a church pours all its energies into prayer without the clear preaching and teaching of God's Word, emotional fanatics begin to pop up everywhere. Prayer balances out the Word. Both are necessary for a healthy, faith-building church.

