

Good News about Unproven Christians

1 Thessalonians 3:5-9

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Introduction

You all know what it is to wonder if someone you love is okay or not.

- If you hear someone in your house fall down the stairs (unless it is your ten year old son who does it for sport), you run to them and you say, “Are you okay?”
 - It is a great relief to hear their voice and to see that they are fine.
- Likewise, recently when Hurricane Harvey struck, many of you contacted Chelsea, a former member of our church who lives in Houston and said, “Are you okay?”
 - How happy you were to hear that she and her family were okay.
- A couple of week ago when Joseph was in Barcelona during the terrorist attack...
 - How relieved we were to hear the news that he was okay.
 - We gave thanks to God when we heard how Joseph had planned to be in that part of the city when the attack came, but was providentially delayed.

We long to know that those we love are okay when there is some uncertainty about their wellbeing.

And if you are a Christian, you are even more concerned about the spiritual state of those you love when there is some uncertainty about their spiritual condition.

- When young believers move away from us—or believers who are weak or struggling—there is no greater joy than to hear that they are walking in the truth.
- When young adults go away to study or to live, what joy it gives us to hear that they are doing well.
- When a struggling church in our Presbytery sends a report, what a relief it is to hear that they are holding fast to the Lord.

In our sermon series from Paul’s letter to the church at Thessalonica,

- we have seen how anxious he was to know how the congregation was doing.
- He and his companions, Silvanus (or Silas) and Timothy, had preached the gospel in the synagogue there for three weeks,
 - and they had seen many Jews as well as Greeks come to believe, even though there was much opposition from those who did not receive the gospel.
- The opposition had been so severe toward Paul and his companions, that they had to be taken away to Berea.
 - Soon their enemies from Thessalonica pursued them there and they had to go away to Athens by sea to escape them.
- But this was the last thing they wanted to do!
 - The Thessalonians were not yet grounded in the faith—and so Paul kept trying to return to them to establish them and encourage them in the faith...
 - But he could not get to them.
 - Satan kept hindering him.
 - Paul says that he could not endure this—he just had to get to them.

- Finally, they sent Timothy as a provisional measure.
 - And one of the main things Paul wanted Timothy to find out was how they were doing—were they continuing in the faith.
 - In 1 Thess 3:5, he says: **For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.**
 - Although they had professed their faith, Paul knew that some of them might not really know Christ yet and might fall away when trouble came.
 - Paul had seen some the Galatians turn away from Christ.
 - That is always a concern—but it was especially a concern for unproven believers like these at Thessalonica who were being so severely persecuted.
 - Paul loved them and he wanted to know that they were okay!

And today Paul tells us about the report that Timothy brought back to him.

- It must have been so hard for Paul to wait for Timothy's return.
 - It was a good ten day journey from Athens to Thessalonica, so if Timothy was there for another ten days, that means that he was gone for a month.
- Let's look at what Paul writes about Timothy's report and Paul's reception of it.

Please give attention now as I read to you from 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

- This is the precious, infallible Word of God.

1 Thessalonians 3:6-10: But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you— ⁷ therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your

faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith?

May the Lord bless to us the reading and the exposition of His holy Word.

In applying this passage to you today,

- I want you to learn how you ought to respond to the news that unproven Christians are continuing in the Lord.
 - We receive reports all the time about our brothers and sisters in the Lord, and we need to learn to respond to good reports the way Paul does.

I. The first thing you need to do when receiving a report is to look for solid evidence about how they are doing in the Lord.

A. You need to find out if they *really* are doing well.

1. Sometimes reports are based more on wishful thinking—on both the giver of the report and the receiver.
 - After all, nobody wants to be the bearer of bad news and nobody wants to receive bad news, but we should care enough to want to know the truth.

- But you know what happens:
 - a. A young person goes away to university and they report back to their parents that they are doing okay in their walk... “yea, I’m staying close to God.”
 - Ask specific questions.
 - What is the pastor preaching on at church?
 - Have you been able to witness to anyone?
 - How is your prayer life?
 - What temptations are you facing?
 - Have you met anyone that is an encouragement to your faith?
 - b. I have a friend that will sometimes tell me how powerfully God is working a friend’s life that he has been reaching out to.
 - But I always have follow up questions...
 - Is this person still living with his girlfriend?
 - Where is he going to church?
 - Has he joined?
 - These questions tell me how much I ought to rejoice.
 - c. Muslim outreaches will sometimes report of new converts—but then when you ask how many of them were baptised,
 - you find out that none of them were—because of fear of persecution.
 - If they tell you of baptisms, then you can know that these converts are serious—if not, there is much more that needs to be done.
 - d. I think I told you about the fellow that told me of his mission trip to Mexico where there were several hundred that accepted Jesus as Saviour.
 - This fellow went on a mission teach to help out a missionary in a small church that was meeting in a house.
 - I asked him where the church was meeting now, and he said they were still meeting in the house.
 - I asked him how they could do that when there were several hundred new converts and he said that only a couple of them had come to church since they received Jesus.
2. Don’t be gullible.
- It doesn’t help anyone—especially the people we are ministering to—to pretend that all is well when it is not!
 - If they are not doing well, we need to pray and labour accordingly.
 - We need to confront them and challenge them.
 - Pretending that all is well will not help anyone.
 - So many churches do not discipline their members.
 - We certainly want to be charitable, but there is nothing charitable about turning a blind eye to apostasy and sin.
- B. Paul received solid evidence from Timothy that the Thessalonians were doing well.
- What was the evidence that he received?
 1. First, Timothy brought good news of their faith.

- a. This means that Timothy told Paul what the Thessalonians were professing to believe—and it was solid.
 - 1) This was very significant.
 - They were persecuted simply for receiving the truth that Jesus Christ is the Messiah—that He was God manifested in the flesh and that He had died on the cross to atone for His people’s sins.
 - They were standing firm in that truth despite those who were opposing them.
 - 2) Timothy must have gone into some detail, because later on in Paul’s letter he addresses some specific matters about the return of Christ that some of them were struggling with.
 - But overall, they were standing firmly in the faith that had been delivered to them.
 - b. Mark it down though, if a person is not holding to the basic tenants of the faith, then they are not doing well at all.
 - In our day, they may be pressured to deny that Jesus is the Son of God,
 - or perhaps that God sends those without forgiveness through Christ to hell for their sins.
 - Or they may deny that the Bible is truly the Word of God and so is without error.
 - These are the sort of things that we have to find out about if we want to know if they are holding firmly to the faith.
 - c. And let me point out that all of you need to be sure that *you* are holding firmly to the true Christian faith as it was delivered to us by the apostles.
 - If you are not, it calls your relationship with God into question.
 - You may have had warm experiences and you may have turned your life around—
 - but if you are not holding to the essential tenants of the Christian gospel, you are not yet a true Christian.
- But that is not all that we need to find about.
- 2. Timothy also reported good news about their love.
 - a. Remember that these Thessalonians were being severely persecuted.
 - That meant that some of them lost their jobs or were fined or imprisoned.
 - It would be very easy to see the love in the congregation in such times.
 - Sacrifices were being made to provide for those who were in need.
 - Those in prison were being visited.
 - Those in poverty were being fed and clothed or provided with a place to live.
 - b. And there was another marvellous way that their love would be seen in their circumstances.
 - We learn in Acts 17 that among the believers here, there were Jews, prominent Greeks, and former idol worshippers.

- These are persons who would have had very little in common with each other—but now they were thrown together.
 - Corinth would have had a similar mix of people, and there were divisions among them—between rich and poor and between Jew and Gentile...
 - But Timothy's report was that the Thessalonians were actively loving each other.
 - As Paul reminds us in the opening of his letter, they were labouring or toiling for one another in love.
- c. Dear congregation, love is also an indispensable mark of a true Christian profession.
- Here what the apostle John says to you if you do not love one another:
 - **1 John 4:7-8: Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.**
 - This is clear.
 - If you are harbouring bitterness or practicing hatred instead of love, you are not doing well in the Lord.
 - You need to repent and receive the Holy Spirit so that you can love as Christ loved.
 - That is the mark of a true Christian.
 - Hatred and murder is the mark of the sons of the devil.
 - Here again,
 - We ought to not receive as believers those who are devoid of love.
 - We should not pretend that professing Christians are doing well if they do not love others, but should call them to repentance,
 - realising that we may be evangelising them when we do that.
- Paul also mentions another piece of evidence that proved that the Thessalonians were doing well—
- And of course in saying these things to them he was also encouraging them to continue in these marks of genuine discipleship.
3. Timothy reported that they had good memories of the ministry that Paul, Silas, and Timothy had had among them.
- a. You can see how Paul expresses this at the end of verse 6:
- **and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you—**
 - Think about the situation here.
 - They had been sorely persecuted for following the doctrine and life that Paul and his companions had brought to them.
 - If they had not really and truly come to Christ, they would have resented the missionaries and the trouble they brought into their lives.
 - But because they truly loved the Lord, they were thrilled with these missionaries who had come to share the gospel with them.

- Nor were they resentful of the fact that Paul had not been able to come to them...
 - They believed that he wanted to come to see them, and they were very desirous to see him and Silas as well.
 - They loved these men because they loved the word of the Lord that these men brought to them.
 - They wanted to hear more—they wanted to be with them.
- b. This is a mark of a true Christian—that they love those who minister to them.
 - People who are not true have had enough of the gospel and the teaching of Christ.
 - They do not want to go to church to hear the word preached or to receive ministry, nor do they find pleasure in reading God’s Word.
 - Sometimes, they may claim to delight in receiving the Word,
 - but they do not want to receive it from ministers who are alive and who can address them personally.
 - The Jews were like that throughout their history.
 - As long as a prophet was dead, they were quite fond of him.
 - They were disciples of Moses and Abraham...
 - but the prophets who were ministering in their day were despised.
 - This is what they did with Jesus and His apostles in their day.
 - And today, there are many who claim to follow Jesus who would hate Him if He were actually here.
 - They can twist His word when He is not here to correct them.
 - This is why it is important to ask the question of those who are reported to be doing well about their connection with church...
 - Are they under the care of the elders of a church? And what church? Is it one that holds its members to a credible profession of faith?
 - Are they faithfully hearing the word and receiving ministry face to face or only from ministers on the internet or through the writings of those who are dead?
 - And are they hungry for the word and hungry to apply it?

TRANS> So you see the kind of evidence that we need to look for to determine if unproven believers really are doing well in their walk with the Lord.

- Paul was not one to play games about this.
 - He knew that the souls of professing Christians were too important to mess around with.
 - He was not interested in feel good reporting—he wanted to know the truth.
- But because this was so, it made his joy all the more solid because he knew that it was based on solid evidence.
 - It was very clear—the Thessalonians really were prospering in the Lord.
 - As Paul put it back in 1 Thessalonians 1:4, he was sure of their election by God because they had received the Word of God.

- And this brings us to the next thing you will do when you receive a good report if you are walking with the Lord...

II. You should be overjoyed when you find that unproven believers are doing well in their walk!

A. Paul calls Timothy's report the *gospel* of the Thessalonians faith and love.

1. It is translated by the words *good news* in verse 6...
 - That is what the word *gospel* means—
 - But in the New Testament, this word is typically reserved to refer to the *gospel* of Jesus Christ—
 - the good news that He came into the world to save sinners and that whoever believes in Him will not perish but will have everlasting life.
 - It seems that Paul is deliberately using this word to refer to the good news that Timothy brought about the Thessalonians to show how marvellous it was.
2. And really it is like the good news of the gospel.
 - The good news of Christ and His saving work is good news because it brings salvation to sinners!
 - It is terrible news for those who reject it—because it tells them that they are condemned unless they believe on the Lord Jesus who died on the cross—unless they trust in Him to take away their sins.
 - It is the most awful news in the world to be told to those who have rejected the gospel.
 - But the gospel is the gospel when it saves...
 - And that is why it was gospel for Paul to hear of the faith and love of these Thessalonian converts that he had been so concerned about!
 - Paul could not divorce the gospel of Jesus as an abstraction, but only saw it as good news because it saved people from their sins...
 - The continuance of the Thessalonians in the faith was the gospel.

B. Just look at how great his joy was when he received this gospel about the Thessalonians.

1. In verse 7 he says that learning about their faith comforted him in all his affliction and distress.
 - a. Paul was very concerned about the Thessalonians—
 - He wanted to see them in the presence of Christ when Christ returned and he was afraid that the persecutions might have turned them away.
 - Until he got Timothy's report, he was very anxious about this.
 - What a flood of relief it was when he heard that all was well.
 - He could not bear to think of them being cast in the abyss on the day that Christ appears—but now he was sure he would see them in heaven!
 - But this concern about them is not what the words affliction and distress probably refer to here.

- b. These words typically refer to pressure from without—things that he was facing at this time such as he describes in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28:
 - **From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; ²⁶ in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; ²⁷ in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness— ²⁸ besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.**
 - c. Paul seems to be saying that the report about the Thessalonians made these afflictions and distresses much easier to bear!
 - Do you see why they would?
 - Because it made all of his sufferings seem worth it!
 - Paul did not have a piety that made him unconcerned about how his converts were doing—just the opposite!
 - All his suffering was worth it because it was bringing life to people!
 - Yes, if he had had to bear such reproach without much fruit at all the way Jeremiah did, he would have done it for the Lord.
 - But knowing that the people he was ministering to were going to be in heaven made it easy to suffer for the gospel!
 - We can see the same spirit in Jeremiah, except that Jeremiah did not have hardly any converts.
 - Jeremiah was often miserable because he did not have this encouragement—he wept for the people—as Jesus did...
 - But Paul was full of joy because the people he suffered for in love were walking with the Lord!
 - Christ was exalted when people believed, and Paul said, most gladly will I suffer...
2. In verse 8 Paul explains that he can live—if they stand fast in the Lord!
- It would have been the death of Paul if they had not gone on for the Lord.
 - How would he be able to live if they had rejected the Lord?
 - This is the man who loved his own people so much that he would have been cursed that they might be saved.
 - His life was wrapped up in their lives.
 - That is why he poured himself out so constantly for the sake of others.
- Let me tell you something...
- C. You will never know the joy that Paul knew without love for others.
- He speaks of all the joy that he had because of them in verse 9...
1. We are so selfish...
- a. Some people want to protect themselves from getting hurt...
 - So they hold themselves off from others.
 - They are selfish and they are miserable.

- Look at a person who has abandoned other people—
 - Do you know such people?
 - They are miserable people—they don't know what it is to give to others.
 - They have closed themselves off.
- b. Other people are just caught up with their own interests and do not pay much attention to others.
 - Sure, they might have a pang of sorrow when someone suffers and might pull someone out of the ditch,
 - but when it comes to really investing themselves and pouring out their lives for others—they want nothing of it.
- Which one of these selfish modes do you struggle with?
- 2. Know that we were not meant to live in these selfish ways.
 - Jesus came not only to bring forgiveness to us, but also to deliver us from our selfish lives.
 - When we minister to others in this fallen world, it means that we have to suffer for their sake—because this is a fallen world!
 - And really, without the gospel, we don't know what it is to truly care about others because we have nothing more important than this world to be concerned about.
 - But when you once face the reality that there is a heaven and there is a hell,
 - Then you are in a position to experience extreme joy that transcends this world when the people you love are headed for heaven...
 - And extreme sorrow deeper than those outside of Christ can know when the people you love are rejecting Christ.
 - It is only as you come to truly experience this joy and this sorrow that you come to know what it really means to be a human being.
 - You are dead until you come to Christ and you are incapable of true love.
 - It is only in Christ that we are able to truly love one another.
- 3. My brothers and sisters, see that you are growing in Christian love.
 - This love is something that you are to mature in and that you *will* mature in as you walk with Jesus Christ.
 - By looking at Paul, we can see how short we come.
 - By looking at Christ, we can see it even more.
 - He loved us so much that He left glory and bore God's wrath on the cross to save us—how great His joy is to us saved now!
 - Yes, you have a long way to go yet...
 - But do not despair.
 - The same Spirit that transformed Paul is at work in you to give you life from the dead.
 - He is in the business of conforming you into the likeness of Jesus Christ and all His fullness of life.

TRANS> Now you can see why I said that if things are right with you and God, you will have extreme joy when you see that unproven believers are standing faithfully in the Lord!

- What could be better news than that!
- And now we come to the last thing I want to show you this morning...

III. How should you respond to *God* when you receive good news about hitherto unproven Christians?

- You should respond like Paul does—with abundant thanksgiving and prayers of hope.
 - Let's look at each of these.

A. First, you ought to respond with abundant thanksgiving to God.

1. See Paul's example throughout his letter to the Thessalonians...

a. Do you remember how he began this letter with thanksgiving?

- In chapter 1, verse 2, no sooner had he addressed them as **“the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,”**
 - than he was saying **“we give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers.”**
- I told you that such thanksgiving is very typical of Paul in all his letters.
 - And note well—it is not just that he feels thankful...
 - but rather that he actually thanks God for them when he says his prayers.

b. And then in chapter 2 v. 13, he is at it again...

- There, he thanks God for the way they had welcomed the word of God which he had first preached to them...
 - not as if it were only the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, that was effectively working in them that believed.

c. And now here we are toward the end of chapter 3 and Paul is thinking again of how thankful he was when he received Timothy's report...

- But this time, he expresses his thanks in a different way—as a question.
 - In chapter 3, verse 9, he says: **For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God?**

2. Paul is full of thanksgiving...

a. First of all—because, as we have seen, he truly loved the Thessalonians and he cared so deeply about whether they stood or fell...

b. And secondly, because he knew that it was God who had kept them...

- It was God who had given them the grace to stand when they had received so little instruction or encouragement in the faith.
- It was God who had enabled them to continue in their faith and love when their own countrymen were raging against them.
- It was God who had kept them hungering for the word and longing to see the face of those who had ministered the word to them.

➤ He would not have had reason to thank God unless he believed that their perseverance was a work of God.

3. My brothers and sisters, if you are not full of thanksgiving when you hear that unproven Christians are standing in the Lord, something is wrong.
 - Either you don't really love them and care about them...
 - Or you don't see how important it is for them to continue in the gospel—heaven and hell are not a big deal to you...
 - Or you don't realise that it is only by God's grace that they were able to stand in the day of testing.
 - You'd be advised to take spiritual inventory to make sure that *you* are in the faith.
 - You should be bursting with thanks if your children are walking with the Lord—if they are being proven day by day.
 - Even if they have some failings and some weakness—do not fail to give thanks if God has kept them in the faith!

TRANS> And that brings us to the second way you ought to respond when unproven Christians are proven...

B. You ought to pour out ardent prayers for their continued growth in grace!

1. That's right, now that you are confident that they are in the Lord,
 - You ought to ramp up your prayers even more!
 - They are God's people—God is work in them—so pray for them!
 - Pray for the place where you know that God is working.
2. Look at what Paul says about this in verse 10:
 - **night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith.**
 - a. You see how far he is from saying, “now that you have been proven, I am so relieved that I don't need to pray for you anymore.”
 - no—“night and day praying exceedingly.”
 - What strong language this is—
 - His prayers have been stirred up all the more by the news that God is at work in them.
 - b. And look at what he is praying for...
 - 1) He still wants to go and see them.
 - In fact, it appears that he wants to go to them more than ever now that Timothy has brought back this good report about them.
 - He wants to complete the work of establishing them in the faith...as he says: **to perfect what is lacking in your faith.**
 - 2) But why is he so eager to go now when Timothy has just returned and told Paul that they are doing well?
 - It *because* they are doing well that he wants to go more than ever.
 - The good report of them makes him all the more eager not only to pray for them, but also to go and serve them.

➤ This is the way it is with ministry in the Lord.

- 3) Those who want ministry the most are the ones who get the most ministry!
- That is how it is for a pastor.
 - When you see God working in people—when you see them hungry for God’s word—it stirs you up to do more for them!
 - Parents, is this not true for you too?
 - If your children are showing hunger for God’s word, does it not stir you up all the more to do family worship—to pour yourself into it more!
 - You ought to strive to make them hungry and that will set you to praying and labouring, but you will be all the more motivated if they are hungry!
 - I know that as a pastor, when you are a hungry congregation, you draw the word out from me.
 - Some of you look like you are half asleep—that makes it hard to preach...
 - But because some of you are hungry—and it shows—that makes it way easier for me to labour in my preparations and to be earnest in my delivery.
 - Of course it makes me try to stir you up when you are sluggish, but the real energy comes when you are hungry.
 - We had a hungry believer who moved from here a few years ago, and that person’s new pastor said, “you must really miss so and so when you are preaching...”
 - And it is true—but I thank God that there are several among our congregation that are hungry for the word.

TRANS> So my brothers and sisters, when you see that God is at work in another person or in a church somewhere,

- let that stir you up all the more to pray all the more for that person or that church!
 - Yes, don’t neglect prayer for those about which you are yet uncertain...

Conclusion:

But when you receive the proof of their faith and love and hunger for ministry,

- be glad, give lavish thanks, and pray more than ever for those Christians.
- It is *such* good news!
 - How good our God is to preserve His people.