Prayer:

Dear Father, we thank you for the opportunity it is to come and fellowship together tonight. I thank you for the time of worship we have had, and I ask that you open all of our hearts and ears to your word tonight, myself included. We pray this in Jesus name, Amen.

Introduction:

As I'm sure we can all agree, the last couple of years have been quite turbulent and volatile. And towards the end of each year, there is always a glimmer of hope, that surely, next year won't be as bad. Well, this was definitely the case at the end of last year. Lockdowns, which once ruled our lives, finally seemed like they were going cease. Communities and borders were opening back up for the first time in years, and for a moment, it seemed like life was going to go back to normal. Yet, it seems that this wasn't meant to be.

In February, Russia invaded Ukraine, which has now become a 3-month long war with no end in sight. However, in all the terror and horror that is occurring in Ukraine, there have been some extraordinary stories of men and women, standing up against the Russian invaders. Standing up for their freedoms, their families, their property, and their sovereignty.

One story that captured my attention recently was that of Evgenia. You see, Evgenia is a Ukrainian businesswoman, who, over the past 12 years had built up a successful jewellery business. However, when news of war came, instead of fleeing to seek refuge, Evgenia decided to do her part to help. Well, interestingly enough, one of her hobbies before the war started was going down to the local shooting range. So, realising the skill set she had acquired, Evgenia decided to offer her skills to the Ukrainian defence force. You see,

Evgenia was willing to put her life at risk, to stand for her freedom. To stand for their sovereignty. To stand up for her own people.

Well in our passage today, we are confronted with a same need. A need to stand firm. However instead of standing firm for freedom or sovereignty, we will see the Thessalonian church was needing to stand firm in their faith, despite all the persecution and trials they themselves were facing.

[SLIDE] The title of the message today is **Standing Firm in faith until he comes.**

And as we work through this passage this evening, we see a reminder to **Be strengthened and encouraged to stand firm in the faith until he comes.**

Point 1: Concern for their **faith** (vv1-5)

- **Selfless love for our brothers and sisters in the faith (vv1)**

So friends, the first point of this chapter focuses upon Paul's concern for those going through afflictions. We see this becomes apparent in verse 1 where Paul demonstrates a restlessness and selflessness toward the Thessalonian church.

Let's have a look together at verses 1-2a: "*Therefore, when we could no longer stand it, we thought it was better to be left alone in Athens. And we sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ,*".

The "Therefore" mentioned at the beginning of this verse, takes us back to the second chapter of this book, specifically verses 17-20. Within these verses Paul describes his desire to meet with the church again, and how this opportunity has not been granted to him, even though they have tried many times. Paul's longing and desire to reunite with this church sets the scene for chapter three.

With this in mind, we see that Paul and his companions could no longer stand being kept apart from the church. This longing and desire leads Paul to prioritise the Thessalonian church over his own needs. His need for companionship. As we read in the end of verse 1: "we thought it was better to be left alone in Athens".

It is important to note that we should not trivialise the word "left" in verse 1.

The use in this context should not be confused with the lunch that you **left** at home.

OR

The reusable grocery bag you **left** in the car for the 1 millionth time, whenever you go shopping.

RATHER In this context, left brings across a similar meaning that helps explain the separation that death brings. Or even that of a man leaving his parents to be united with his wife.

Or, to use a more relatable example. Church plants. There have now been two different church plants that have occurred here at Grace. Even though these occurred before my time, I still hear stories of how hard it was to say goodbye to church members who had become family. This separation……is what is meant by **left** here in this context.

Paul is explaining the tearing away that occurred when he decided to send Timothy.

You see, Timothy was a co-worker with Paul for the Gospel. And Paul was now in one of the most challenging places in the known world for preaching the Gospel. He was in Athens. The home of philosophers and idolators alike. For Paul to send Timothy away at this time would have been difficult on a personal level, as Paul loved Timothy and considered him as a son. But more so, it would have been hard on Paul's ministry. Being left alone in Athens, now saw Paul ministering in one of the most **<u>pagan cities</u>** in the world, without his co-worker.

You see, Paul was willing to go without much for the sake of the Thessalonian believers. Giving up companionship as well the resource of Timothy, that would have been of great use in Athens. And this selfless love is something we see repeatedly in his ministry. A love to put others needs above his own. A priority to put the Gospel and the ministry of Jesus Christ above any of his own temporal needs.

And this is what a shepherd does, isn't it? Or at least this is what a good shepherd should do. Paul realised that these believers were under his care, and no matter what was required, he had to ensure that his own people were being taken care off. That those believers, who are part of God's flock, were looked after. That they were sustained. That they were guided.

- **The role to strengthen and encourage those suffering affliction (2-4)**

So it is through Paul's concern, we see Timothy is sent to Thessalonica. Let's read verse 2b-5

> *"to strengthen and encourage you concerning your faith, [3] so that no one will be shaken by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. [4] In fact, when we were with you, we told you in advance that we were going to experience affliction, and as you know, it happened. For this reason, when I could no longer stand it, I also sent him to find out about your faith, fearing that the tempter had tempted you and that our labour might be for nothing."*

As one who felt directly responsible for these new believers, Paul was determined to ensure that their faith was still set on Christ, and that they had endured while being separated.

Now, the Thessalonian Church was under pressure and persecution for their faith. We see in Acts 17 that some believers were already being persecuted, which led to Paul and Silas fleeing the city.

With many trials and afflictions facing this new church, Timothy's role was to strengthen and encourage these believers' faith……to help them stand firm. Or as Paul puts it *"so that no one will be shaken by these afflictions."*.

You see, the Thessalonian church was not unaware of the persecution that was to come. As we see in Verse 4, Paul had already warned them, saying *"we told you in advance that we were going to experience affliction"*. However, an understanding of the affliction that was to come was no guarantee that they would remain faithful to the gospel.

<u>An understanding alone is not enough!!</u>

Now this concern is what drives Paul to send Timothy away. As verse 5 tells us, "it was for this reason", **[PAUSE]** because of the persecution they faced……that Paul sends Timothy to encourage and strengthen those believers and report back about their faith.

Even though Paul was facing his own fair share of persecution, he prioritised the needs of these young believers……..fearing that the enemy had tempted them and that all his efforts may have been wasted.

I was recently reading an article by Open Doors, an organisation that works with persecuted churches around the world. This article was about the church in North Korea and how they have been assisted, strengthened and encouraged by fellow Christians in China. Now, according to Open Doors, North Korea is currently rated as the 2nd most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian, due to the current communist government.

But thanks to corridors that are open between these two countries, more established Christians from China have been able to supply biblical training, as well as practical needs such as food and clothing to Christians in North Korea.

You see, even though China is also in the top 20 most persecuted churches in the world, these believers are in a position where they are able to encourage and strengthen their North Korean brothers and sisters, who are in a worse spot then them.

Now, these examples might seem completely foreign to us Christians living in Australia. We may not know many people who are experiencing persecution due to their faith. However, this doesn't mean that we are off the hook.

The example that Paul sets is one of selfless love.

- One of care and encouragement.
- One of strengthening those who are afflicted.
- Those who may be discouraged.
- Those who may be young in their faith.

And like Paul, the needs of others should be put before our own needs. This, friends, is challenging. In a society and culture where I am number 1, where my needs are put before everyone else, this sounds so counter cultural.

I was talking to a mate the other day who said, "I've come to realise that in life you have to look after number 1, because no one else will……." **[SMILE]**

[QUIET] This is the world we live in. **<u>But if we are</u>** to be Christians who follow after Christ and represent him, we must be known for our love.

Our love for God

Our love for one another

And Our love for everyone.

[QUIET] So……. in our own lives…… how are we caring and suffering with those around us? Those who are struggling in their faith? Those who are still young in the faith?

Paul shows the concern and selflessness require, which sets quite a high standard for us to follow. We all have our own problems and challenges in life. Just like Paul and those Christians in China. But even so, even with our problems and challenges, we are encouraged to stand firm with our brothers and sisters. Letting their sorrow be ours. Letting their pain be ours. Letting their weakness be ours.

And this is such a challenging point isn't it. However we must remind ourselves that even though we are called to share in others pain and suffering, we will also share in their joy and delight. And this is what we see here in our next point: The encouragement from their faith.

Point 2: The encouragement from their **faith** (vv6-10)

- **Good news and love that comes from persevering (6) (570 words)**

Let's have a read through the beginning of this verse 6: *"But now Timothy has come to us from you and brought us good news about your faith and love"*.

We see quite a stark difference in the coming and going of Timothy within these verses. In verse 1 he is leaving in the context of anxiety and uncertainty of what he might find. Leaving to strengthen and encourage a young church who may have fallen away due to the trials and afflictions they were facing. However, in verse 6, Timothy has come back with encouragement and good news that was hoped for.

This good news is so good, that the word used in the Greek here is typically the word that is used when preaching the gospel. And interestingly enough, this is the only time in the New Testament that this word is **not** used within the context of **[SLOW]** God's saving work. So instead of this word being used to explain the sharing of the gospel or the preaching of God's revelation, it is used to communicate the excesses of joy that this news brought Paul.

You see, the energy, effort and passion that was poured into his ministry was not wasted, as Paul had previously feared. But even more important than this, is the fact that those who had accepted Christ had truly accepted Him. They were true Christians.

Now, Paul was well aware of what persecution can do to those who had received the gospel of Christ with joy…. but had not yet been established in their faith. We are reminded of this very point with the Parable of the sower. In this parable, we see some seeds scattered among the rocky places that didn't have much soil. The plant sprung up quickly because the soil was shallow, but eventually the plant is scorched by the sun and dies, as it had no root. [PAUSE] Trouble and persecution because of the gospel……the sun, [PAUSE] was beaming down on this young church who had received the good news with joy. And Paul would have been fearful that they had no root.

<u>However</u>, they persevered through persecution and affliction,

showing that **even though** their time with Paul and his companions was short, that they had established a firm foundation in faith and love. A root that afflictions could not destroy.

As well this good news, we see a mutual longing and yearning to meet again. **Verse 6 continues…** *"He reported that you always have good memories of us and that you long to see us, as we also long to see you."* As Joe showed us a number of weeks ago in the beginning of chapter 2, Paul treated these believers with love. Chapter 2 verse 11 reads, "like a father with his own children, we encouraged, comforted, and implored each one of you walk worthy of God…." Or verse 6 which says, "we were gentle among you, as a nurse nurtures her own children.". The love demonstrated by Paul, left the Thessalonian church with a longing to meet again [PAUSE] with the one who had originally shared the gospel, encouraged, nurtured, and comforted them. They longed to see each other.

However, this could have quite easily gone the other way. As we have learnt in the past weeks, there was a smear campaign against Paul, which was made all the more challenging seeing that he was no longer in Thessalonica to defend himself. Yet despite his name being slandered, the church remained loyal to him, putting their experience of his character before baseless accusations.

This becomes yet another reason for encouragement. Not only were they faithful to the gospel, but they had a love and longing for Paul.

- **The encouragement standing firm can bring those going through afflictions (7-8)**

Now, this good news of their faith, love and longing to meet again, becomes a source of great encouragement. You see, Paul feared that those **he loved** had departed from what he had taught. It is for this very reason he sends Timothy to strengthen and encourage the church. However, as well as Timothy being an encouragement for the church, the church becomes an encouragement for Paul and his companions. Let's read verse 7: *"Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and affliction, we were encouraged about you through your faith".*

In the trials that Paul was facing in his own life, encouragement came in the form of others standing firm in their faith.

Although there was a tide of affliction plaguing the young Thessalonian church, their faith remained in Christ. This news gives Paul some much needed encouragement through his own afflictions which we see bringing him distress.

To take this point even further, we see this encouragement brings **LIFE** to Paul and his companions. Let's read verse 8: *"For now we live if you stand firm in the Lord."*. We have previously seen the encouragement that Timothy's report has brought. However, now we see **the life** that comes from this encouragement.

Other translations are useful in getting a better view of the word life in this verse.

For now we can breathe again

For now we really live

For now we can go on living

For now we are alive again

For those of you who don't know me all that well, I love fishing. Ever since I was about 8 years old, I couldn't get enough of it. Now, this love doesn't mean I'm any good at it, I just like doing it. So, a couple of months ago I went fishing in a boat around 15km off the Gold Coast. Usually I don't get that seasick, however this trip was the exception to the rule. From the first hour on the water, I was really sick, and after fighting off symptoms, I decided to call it quits and lie down for a while. Well before I decided to do this, I had put out a large bit of bait that was still sitting in the water. As I was lying down and contemplating my life choices up that that point in time, I heard my reel start screaming, and the calls from the other guys that it was my rod. Well, I got up quicker than ever, ran over to my rod and was on to a trophy sized fish. In that moment, all my seasickness left, the contemplation ceased, and life was good. I was laughing, yahooing and things couldn't get any better.

Well even though stories like this may sound a little silly, it is a reminder that when we go through troubles, there are encouragements that can bring life. Encouragements that help us persevere through all the woes of life. Encouragements that give us a fresh perspective.

[QUIET] And this is the impact the Thessalonian believer's faith had on Paul. You see, standing firm in the faith can be an encouragement for believers. Believers that care and genuinely want to see you mature and grow in your faith.

Well, the example we see Paul established with his care and genuine love for the Thessalonian church is quite challenging. Although we can often think that we desire and want to see someone do well…..sometimes our own flesh, our own jealousy can get in the way. I'm sure we are all familiar with Tall Poppy Syndrome. You know, when you want to discredit or put down others who are doing better than you.

Well, this can be a challenge for us believers. Needing to put others above ourselves, like Paul does, means that we seek to uplift, encourage, and edify our brother and sisters so that they might be more Christlike. **[PAUSE]** **BUT**, what if they become more Christlike than me?

What if they begin to flourish in the faith, whilst we might be struggling through trials or affliction?

What if they start having victories over sins that you are still struggling with?

As I'm sure we are all aware, it can be so easy to let jealousy take over and change the way we view those we love. However, Paul is setting an example, that our relationships and lives should be permeated with **genuine love** for each other.

As Jesus says in John 13:34-35, *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another"*. **[PAUSE]**

Therefore, in our relationships with other believers, let our love be genuine love. Love that doesn't seek selfish ambition. **Rather**, a love that seeks to see others be made mature, strengthened and encouraged in their own faith, [PAUSE] no matter what stage they are at. A love that brings us pain and anguish when our brothers and sisters are discouraged and going through afflictions. A love that brings us genuine joy and life in the midst of our own trials.

Just like the sound of the screaming reel in my fishing story, is the news of others faith bringing us life?

- **Thankfulness to the Lord for the joy this has brought (9-10)**

Well, as Paul is filled with life and encouragement, we see the thankfulness he has to God for the good news that has been brought back. Let's read verses 9-10 *"How can we thank God for you in return for all the joy we experience before our God because of you, as we pray very earnestly night and day to see you face to face and to complete what is lacking in your faith?"*. We see Paul begin with a rhetorical question at the beginning of this section. "How can we thank God for you"?? [PAUSE] Well, the implication with this question is that they can't ever thank God enough. No amount of thanksgiving would ever be enough to repay God for the joy that Paul is now experiencing. Interestingly, Paul's doesn't thank the Thessalonians in this chapter. Paul only brings his thanks to God. For he knows that it is God who has strengthened and held his people in times of trials and afflictions. **It is God**, then, who becomes the true source of this encouragement.

But we see that there is more than just thankfulness to the Lord. Verse 10 shows how the thankfulness in verse 9 is then coupled with prayer. And not just any old prayer. Earnest prayer. And not just the once off earnest prayer. Consistent prayer. Verse 10 says: *"As we prayer very earnestly night and day"*. Now, when Paul mentions night and day here, he doesn't mean that they were continuously praying all day and all night…… just in case you were worried that you had to cross out every event in your calendar for the rest of your life. **[SMILE]**

It is speaking more of a consistency in their prayer, that they would often bring the Thessalonian believers before the Lord in prayer.

But for what reason were they praying?

Well, as verse 10 says: *"To see you face to face and to complete what is lacking in your faith".*

We see here yet another mention of the longing and desire to meet again face to face. And this desire to meet is also coupled with a desire to complete what is lacking in their faith. Now, the church had shown that they could stand through the persecution of their day. **And not only this**, but as we see in chapter 1, this church became a model to all believers in the region. However, Paul realised that they still needed to be matured and strengthened in their faith. Even through all the heights of joy that is experience through the Thessalonians faith, Paul still sees the need for these believers to be further strengthened. To be further encouraged. To be further matured in the faith.

Now this desire to make them complete in their faith, should not be confused with perfection. It is not as though Paul is saying that he wants the Thessalonian believers to be made into sinless, perfect human beings. As I'm sure we are aware, this is not possible. As 1 John 1:8 says, *"If we say, "We have no sin," we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.".* **But rather,** this shows that the work of sanctification is never complete. Even though the Thessalonians had shown that they were able to withstand persecution, they required continual sanctification, so they didn't lack anything required to live out a life of faith.

I'm very lucky to have two very cute nephews. And over the years I have seen them grow and develop.

You know, when they are first born, they don't do a whole lot of moving. But over time they start to learn new skills. They go from not moving at all to moving a little. Then they start dragging themselves along the floor, which eventually turns into crawling…which eventually turns into this awkward attempt at walking…which turns into walking….which turns into running and jumping….and so on.

And, as somewhat of a spiritual father to the church, Paul has seen the believers crawl, which has brought him so much joy and excitement. However, he isn't content with stopping there. He wants to see his spiritual children walk, run and mature fully in their faith. He wants to complete what is lacking.

Now, I know that most of us find it really cute when we see a baby crawling around. Or when we see a toddler start walking and running. However, how cute would we find it if we saw a grown man crawling around? In any normal context, we wouldn't be standing around clapping a 40-year-old man who took his first steps. There is nothing cute, nothing exciting about an overgrown child. **BUT** this should be the same with our faith. We should be progressing, and growing in our faith, so that we might be mature and lacking nothing. Otherwise, we risk being overgrown children in the faith, lacking much.

And it is from this desire…. to see them further matured, that brings us to our 3rd and final point. Prayer for their faith.

Point 3: Prayer for their **faith** (vv11-13)

Now that we have seen Paul's concern and fear turn to joy and thankfulness in the Lord, the end of our passage finishes with a prayer for the church.

Let's read verse 11-13: *"Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you. And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone, just as we do for you. May he make your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Amen."*

As we saw at the end of verse 10, Paul desires to see the church be matured and made complete in their faith, and this prayer demonstrates this by focusing on three points to help them continue to stand firm.

Firstly, Paul's petition to the Lord is that they might be able to meet again. That their paths may no longer be blocked. You see, Paul was aware that he could help this young church by meeting with them again. However as we see at the end of Chapter 2, their path were continuously blocked. Paul's hope for the Lord to direct their paths shows his desire to build them up and help make their faith complete. As well as this it also shows his own love, longing and desire to meet with his brothers and sisters once again.

Secondly, we see love as the object of his prayer. Even though Paul, in chapter 1 of this book recalls their labour motivated by love, he still prays that their love for one another and for everyone will increase. And not only that it would increase, but that it would overflow. Now Paul realised that without love, they had no faith. Love was not meant to be for God alone, or for Christians alone. The command set before all Christians is that we love the Lord our God, and our neighbour. We are called to love all people.

Lastly, Paul prays that the Lord will make their hearts blameless in holiness before God at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his Saints. Now it must be noted that there is a close link between verses 12 and 13. A close link between love and blameless hearts.

This can be a little hard to see in the CSB translation, however, the ESV makes this a little clearer, by starting verse 13 with the conjunction "so that". Inferring that the love that is prayed for in verse 12 will be the instrument for their blameless hearts in verse 13.

See without the former…without love…..the later would be impossible. As Bible commentator Michael Martin puts it: *blameless, sanctified hearts can only grow and bloom in the soil of a genuine and abundant love.*

Through this whole prayer, we see the desire for maturing. A desire to complete what is still lacking in their faith. In order that they may be able to stand firm until the end, until Christ returns. Until that day of final comfort that all of us believers set our eyes towards. [PAUSE]

And this prayer is still so important for us here today. Not only should we desire that we be made mature in the faith, but also those around us to be made mature, that their faith in Christ might stand firm until he comes.

Conclusion

While there will be many challenges in this life due to our faith, our reminder in this passage today is threefold. Firstly, that through genuine love, we should be concerned for other believers' faith. And not only concerned, but that through our concern we might strengthen and encourage believers who are suffering. Believers whose faith is being tested. Believers who are still young and immature in their faith. Secondly, that standing firm in the faith is an encouragement to those around us. Those who care and love us. Those who have laboured to see us strong and rooted in Christ. And thirdly, that prayer is **our** powerful weapon in seeing others be made mature in the faith, so that they may lack nothing. As ultimately, it is God who sustains his children.

As a Christian, this life will become difficult and challenging. However, what a joy it is to see how we can build each other up. How we can build up the body of believers. And how we ourselves can be built up in the woes and afflictions of life, so that we will be encouraged and strengthened in our faith, in preparation of our saviour's sweet return.

Let's pray:

Dear Father, we thank you for your word, that it is still applicable for us today. We thank you for all of our brothers and sisters in the faith, that we might be a source of strength and encouragement for each other through all the season of life. Father, I pray that you show us ways in which we can practically encourage and strengthen those around us, and help us be vulnerable enough to seek such things when we need it. And as we saw through your word, at

the end of the day it is you who holds us and sustains us, so we pray, be near to us when our faith is pressed, and help keep our eyes upon Christ until he comes.

Amen.

Well as we consider the encouragement and strength of this Christian life, let us keep our eyes on the one who sustains us, and keeps us near. Please stand with me and sing.

After the song:

Well, it only seems fitting if we finish with the benediction found at the end of our chapter today:

And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone, just as we do for you. May he make your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Amen.