

something in,” as a container that holds water, or calking on a ship’s haul that keeps the water out. This offers a mental picture that expresses a heart-felt need to know the reality of a situation and not to “miss anything.” Paul uses this language to express his pastoral need to know how the believing community in Thessalonica was doing, especially with the realization that persecution for their faith was a constant, eminent threat. Such a burden required some action, doing whatever possible to ascertain the current condition of the believing community there, so as to know how best to come to their aid.

... *we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone...* – At least two aspects of Paul’s situation in Athens may help to explain their reasons for remaining in Athens. First was the fact that Paul was a prime target for those Jewish leaders who wanted him to be silenced. Others, such as Timothy and Silas, were less “sought after” by those who stood against Yeshua, both regarding Who He is and what He taught. A second motivation for remaining in Athens was Paul’s desire to evangelize people in this key city. That he did so openly at the Areopagus (cf. Acts 17:22ff) would seem to indicate that he felt burdened to find ways to openly proclaim God’s truth and the gospel message, centered in the person and work of Yeshua. At the conclusion of Luke’s account of Paul’s message to the philosophers at the Areopagus he writes:

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.” So Paul went out of their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. (Acts 17:32–34)

3 so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.

So that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions – Paul’s concern for the Thessalonian community of believers is clearly seen here to be for each of the individual believer who comprised the local assembly. This is obvious by the words he writes: τὸ μηδένα, *to mēdena*, “no one,” narrowing his admonition to each individual who makes up the community. His goal is that each one of them might be strengthened in their faith and be enabled thereby to remain valiant and strong witnesses of God’s grace, even in the face of possible persecution for their faith in Yeshua. Indeed, it is the enemy’s scheme to attempt to cause believers to abandon their faith in Yeshua by bringing upon them forms of persecution.

As Zahn observes:

The Tempter, who was threatening to destroy the Apostle's entire work in Thessalonica, assumed not only the form of a roaring lion (1Pet 5), but also that of a fawning dog (Phil 3) and a hissing serpent (2Cor 11).¹

Surely the Apostles warn us regarding the desire and tactics of the enemy who desires to have those who have professed faith in Yeshua to turn and deny Him.

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. (1Pet 5:8–9)

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; (Phil 3:2)

But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Messiah. (2Cor 11:3)

It is important to emphasize the fact that what Paul demonstrates in these verses ought to be the perspective of all who are given leadership responsibilities within the *ekklesia* of Yeshua, namely, that the goal of our instruction ought to be, first and foremost, the spiritual growth and strength of each born again individual within the community. Unfortunately, it seems all too often in our modern world that a primary goal of church leaders is to enlarge the community, putting their time and energy at making the community appealing in order to draw in more people. But ultimately, the true measure of a successful local assembly of believers is not the number of people who attend but what takes place in the lives of individuals who comprise the community, and their stalwart and genuine lives of faith as living examples of God's saving grace.

The word "disturbed" in the NASB is a translation of the Greek word *σαίνω* (*sainō*) which carries the following meanings:

1 Frame, *ICC on 1 & 2 Thessalonians 3:2–3a*, quoting Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1, p. 218.

(1) to try to win favor by an ingratiating manner, fawn upon, flatter; (2) to cause to be emotionally upset, move, disturb, agitate.¹

Clearly, in this text of 1Thess, the second definition of the word is the primary sense. But it is also interesting that the word can carry the sense of “to flatter,” “to win favor by an ingratiating manner.” This reminds us that the enemy of our souls is clever in discerning our weaknesses and using them to attempt to “trip us up” or to lure us away from what we know is right. While this sense of the word is clearly not that which was primary in Paul’s mind, it seems likely that he chose it to include the possibility of the enemy’s method to lure those who had professed faith in Yeshua away from that profession by making them think they really did not need what the gospel offered because they were self-sufficient.

Yet the additional sense the word carries clearly is that which Paul emphasizes in the next phrase.

...*by these afflictions* – Here Paul is referring to the afflictions or forms of persecution which he and his colleagues were experiencing. “Afflictions” translates the Greek word *θλίψις* (*thlipsis*) which can be used to denote not only trouble which comes upon a person by other people or events, causing “distress, oppression, affliction, or tribulation” but may also be used to describe “inward experience of distress, affliction, or trouble.”²

The point in showing both aspects of the Greek term Paul employs is to emphasize this reality: it is the believer’s consistent strengthening of his or her mind and thus of a biblical life perspective that enables one to gain spiritual strength and thus to persevere through times when physical persecution and trials may come. Indeed, genuine spiritual strength comes through consistently feeding upon the word of God, being regularly in prayer, both in requests and thanksgiving, as well as regularly sharing life with other believers, bearing each other’s burdens, and helping each other to strengthen their faith. Such spiritual strength enables one to possess both the desire and ability to persevere even in times of trials and persecution.

...*for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.* – Here Paul is making direct reference to his own suffering and that of his colleagues, Timothy and Silvanus. For it was expected that as they openly confessed

1 BDAG, “*σάινω*,” p. 910.

2 Ibid., “*θλίψις*,” p. 457.

Yeshua to be the true Messiah and their own Savior, there would inevitably be those of the unbelieving Jewish community who would come against them and even seek to do what would be necessary to quiet them and to utterly discount their message.

... *we have been destined for this*. – Here the pronoun “we” seems clearly to be used by Paul initially of himself and his colleagues, but also used in the general sense of true “followers of Yeshua.” Yeshua Himself made this clear to His disciples just prior to His being crucified and it seems certain that the disciples of Yeshua related this teaching of Yeshua to Paul after his coming to faith. Yeshua taught His disciples:

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world. (Jn 16:33)

Thus, when Paul writes that “we have been destined for this,” he is teaching us that affliction perpetrated by the unbelieving world is to be expected by all true believers in Yeshua as a real possibility in the fallen world. The word translated “destined” is *κείμαι* (*keimai*), which generally carries the sense of “to be in a particular place, be appointed, set, or destined.”¹ Paul is not here emphasizing that persecution is something that necessarily “characterizes” true believers in Yeshua, but rather that those who are born again by the saving work of the Lord should not be surprised when the world hates them and may even persecute them in various ways.

This, of course, does not mean that we should expect persecution nor that all believers in all ages will equally suffer persecution at the hands of the unbelieving world. Furthermore, he is not teaching us here that we should seek persecution as some kind of “surety” of possessing genuine faith in Yeshua. Surely Paul was concerned as to whether the Thessalonian believers were remaining stalwart in their faith even when facing persecution, and this is no doubt why he brings up “persecution” as something that is commonly directed toward the true followers of Yeshua by the unbelieving world. Perhaps one of Paul’s main concerns was that they not consider himself and his colleagues as being disciplined by God because they were presently experiencing persecution. Persecution of believers is the result of living in this fallen world, and thus the attempt of the enemy to dim the “light” of the gospel lived out by true believers in Yeshua. But the reality is that all who have true

¹ BDAG, “*κείμαι*,” p. 537.

faith will persevere, even when persecuted, and thus be enabled to be even greater witnesses of God's saving grace and power.

4 For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know.

As substantiation of Yeshua's teaching, that tribulation would be experience by His followers in general, now Paul makes it clear that even he and his colleagues were likewise persecuted by the unbelieving world. Thus, even those who were directly designated by Yeshua as those He had "sent out" to proclaim the gospel message were not exempt from being persecuted by unbelievers.

...we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction – Consider now the lessons to be learned from this statement of Paul. Before he and his colleagues set out to bring the gospel message to such places as Thessalonica, it was made known to them that they would "suffer affliction" for their obedience to Yeshua Who had directed them to take the good news of the Gospel to faraway regions.

This poses an obvious question for each of us who are followers of Yeshua: If we were certain that God was leading us, by His Ruach, to accomplish a given task for His glory and for the good of others, we would undoubtedly desire to do so. But if it was also made known to us that as we engaged in fulfilling the task, we would suffer some form of persecution, would we still be willing to venture forward to accomplish it? It is only as we grow strong in faith, resolving that whatever God has given us to accomplish He will enable us to do, that we are enabled to venture out in obedience to serve Him whole-heartedly.

All too often in our modern world "religion" is set forth as a means of making life better, finding true meaning and satisfaction, and even gaining that which we long for but would otherwise be "out of our reach." These outcomes are surely true, for a life of faith does bring true meaning to our lives and a deeply ingrained satisfaction otherwise unattainable. But what is entirely missing is the added reality that openly living a life of faith in this fallen world may bring struggles, being marginalized or disdained or even persecuted in one way or another.

The fact that Paul uses a verb in the imperfect tense (προελέγομεν < προλέγω, *proelegomen* < *prolegō*) gives the sense that this is something he mentioned multiple times, not just once. Moreover, the verb *prolegō* means more literally "to announce beforehand" and is frequently used in those contexts when a prophecy or oracle about the future is given

(e.g., 1Cor 14:31).

Moreover, Silvanus (Silas) is called a prophet in Acts.

Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. (Acts 15:32)

...and so it came to pass, as you know. – Given these facts, it is all the more clear that before Paul, Timothy, and Silas made their way to Thessalonica, God informed Paul that they would suffer some measure of persecution, and it is this forewarning which he made known to the Thessalonian community when they arrived. Given this picture, it is all the more emphasized that Paul and his colleagues fully committed themselves to God, trusting in His all-sovereign control, in order to accomplish the mission to which they had been sent.

Thus, we are admonished ourselves, by this inspired text, to rely all the more upon the Lord as we seek to be lights in our world of the glorious gospel centered in Yeshua, and to do so even if we anticipate being rejected or even persecuted for obeying the Lord. This likewise moves us to grow in our faith and reliance upon God in order to strengthen our resolve to obey Him and to rejoice in knowing that He has promised always to be with us and to give us success as we serve Him in the power of the Ruach.

This reality reminds us of the words of Moses to the people of Israel as they prepared to enter the promised land:

Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.” (Deut 31:6)

We find similar wording when Yeshua instructed His disciples to be lights of His glorious gospel to the world.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matt 28:19-20)

5 For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.

For this reason – Paul now gives his primary reason for sending Timothy back to Thessalonica in order to retrieve a current report of their life of faith. He sincerely wanted and even needed to know how the Thessalonian believers were doing and especially to gain an assessment of their current life of faith.

...when I could endure it no longer– Paul here reveals his own deep passion for those to whom God had sent him, bringing the life-saving message of the gospel in Yeshua. In so doing, he models the true heart of a pastor or shepherd, expressing the deep care for those to whom he was privileged to bring the gospel of Yeshua and to help them understand and grow in their walk with Him.

It was not as though he lacked faith in God to accomplish His sovereign work, but that he “could endure it no longer” reveals a true heart of love and compassion for the Thessalonian believers. Rather than viewing the call of God as primarily providing him with authority and status, Paul saw himself as a servant of Yeshua, longing to bring the glorious message of the salvation Yeshua had accomplished to those who were lost in their sin.

That Paul “could endure no longer” without receiving first-hand information as to their current status in no way contradicts what he wrote in 1:4, “...knowing your election.” Rather, having been forced to leave, Paul expresses the true heart of a shepherd who, knowing for certain to whom the sheep belong, still is intent on securing their welfare. What is more, Paul is concerned about how they are enduring under the current persecution they doubtlessly were experiencing.

... for fear that the tempter might have tempted you – The questions Paul has in his mind are well articulated by Hendriksen:

Will the genuine character of the faith of the Thessalonians be proved by their willingness to endure tribulation for the sake of Christ? Will they understand that this tribulation is not contrary to God’s plan but in accordance with it?¹

We know that the ultimate mark of genuine faith is that of persever-

1 William Hendricksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Thessalonians* (Baker Academic, 1955), p. 86.

ance. So it is this that Paul is intent upon knowing, and thus a primary reason for sending Timothy back to Thessalonica in order that he would bring back an eye-witness report of how the recent believers in that community were persevering under the harsh persecution to which they undoubtedly were being subjected.

Yeshua, speaking about the tribulation that comes at the end of earth's history, taught:

At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. (Matt 24:10-13)

Though Paul undoubtedly was convinced that many of the Thessalonians who professed faith in Yeshua were genuine in their commitment, the proof would be how they were enabled by God's grace to persevere, even under difficult times of persecution.

Once again, the application of our text relates to our own perseverance in the faith. Are we utilizing the "means of grace" given to us by God and are we thereby growing stronger in our faith? We need not fear that if we were to come under real persecution that we might be unable to persevere, for God has promised that He will enable all who are His to stand firm in the faith.

No temptation [*testing*] has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted [*tested*] beyond what you are able, but with the temptation [*testing*] will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. (1Cor 10:13)