



Let's start with prayer this morning...Amen. Today we continue our journey through Paul's letter known as 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians. Paul knew the people there well, having led them to a place of faith in Jesus and getting the church started before he and his ministry companions were forced out of town. In chapter 1, Paul commends the Thessalonian believers for their faith, love, and hope, noting how their faith has inspired others across the region. He highlights their sincere conversion from idols to serve the true God, showing the power of the Gospel through their transformed lives. In chapter 2, which we spent two Sundays in, Paul recalls his ministry among them, stressing his genuine motives and care, sharing the Gospel not for personal gain but with love and integrity. And then he praises them for accepting the Gospel as God's word and standing firm in faith despite facing persecution.

Today, we will see in a moment that he builds on these themes. And as he does this, he shows us how to really live. Jesus says in John 10:10 that Satan comes to steal life, but he, Jesus himself, has come to give us life, and life to the full...an “abundant life” as it is often translated. And yet: **So frequently, even for Christians, this “abundant life” seems elusive.** Trials of different kinds come our way, and plant seeds of doubt or even derail us from following where God leads and experiencing the abundant life he offers. Maybe you're facing a faith-challenging trial today, or have in the recent past. Today's passage gives us insight into how to face our trials, and have more of an abundant life with God here and now.

Before we read today's passage, I want to take a few minutes and make sure we properly understand the true nature of the trials in life that we face. So, for some of us, there may be some deconstructing of some beliefs in the next few minutes, to get us all at the same foundational level rooted in Scripture. Then we will build something new, at least for some of us, that's rooted in Scripture.

So, painting with some broad brushstrokes, there are essentially two kinds of trials to our faith that we face. **The first kind of trial is connected to**

**temptation and the choice we make in the face of temptation.** That's a trial for us – are we going to give in to temptation, or stay on the straight and narrow path following Jesus? I would include in here intellectual arguments people might present to us that plant seeds of doubt. They are a kind of temptation in addition to the things that tempt us like greed, lust, pride, etc. **The second trial is suffering that happens to us, usually apart from any choice we make.** Job loss, marital brokenness, disease, death... These kinds of things are another kind of trial that can challenge our faith and come between us and God. This is why they are a kind of trial. So, both types of trials can impact our faith – either positively or negatively, which is why it's important to understand the trials from a Biblical standpoint.

**One thing Satan does to derail our faith is to get us to establish a false belief about the Christian life and trials.** For instance, a lot of Christians believe that God “won't give us more than we can handle.” Maybe you've heard that Bible verse before: that God won't give you more than you can handle? The problem is that this verse isn't in the Bible. The idea that God won't give us more than we can handle comes from a misreading of 1 Corinthians 10:13, where the apostle Paul writes, **“No temptation has overtaken you, except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).**

Notice it's a verse about the trial of temptation and sin, and not the trial of suffering. This is crucial. The context is clear in the verses leading up to verse 13, and then in verse 14 he says, “Therefore my dear friends, flee from idolatry.” The solution to the trial of temptation is: “flee!” Run like “H-E-double hockey sticks” 😊. It's like a one sentence sermon, and it's all we need. But so many people take this verse 13, forget the context, and change the wording and apply it to suffering kinds of trials. So we end up believing “God won't give me more suffering or pain or challenges than I can handle.”

But you can't just run away from cancer or job loss or whatever, like you can the trial of a temptation. **The solution for the first trial (temptation) does not work for the second (suffering).** So, what happens when we're facing a

suffering kind of trial that seems to be, or actually is, more than we can handle: we blame God. We doubt God, we question God, we have a crisis of faith...because God's not supposed to give us more than we can handle according to our misunderstanding, misquoting, and misapplication of this verse (1 Corinthians 10:13).

And so, our suffering drives a wedge between us and God. At that point, Satan has won. It's a spiritual sneak attack not through temptation, but through some kind of relational or situational suffering and a misunderstanding of Scripture he's planted in our heads. Look: **The reality is, God gives us more than we can handle all the time!** Scripture is littered with it: Adam and Eve for whom not eating fruit from a tree was too big a task; Moses, who was slow of speech and gave God several excuses why he couldn't lead the Israelites as God was asking him to; So many of the Old Testament prophets who had the job of getting God's people to flee from idols – it wasn't a new problem in Paul's day! – and yet they wouldn't listen to the prophets. It was a bigger task than the prophets could handle.

That's just scratching the surface. The most obvious one for all of us, and the reason we are here: that we can't overcome our sin and its effects and the chasm it creates between us and God. We can't handle that on our own. Spoiler alert: We desperately need Jesus to handle that for us. There are all kinds of things that God gives us, or asks us to do, that are more than we can handle. So, not only is that verse not in the Bible, but there are countless examples of it being contradicted. So, how do we handle the second kind of trials, the faith trials because of suffering and pain in this life? How do we really live, with abundant life, in the face of those? Let's turn to **1 Thessalonians 3** where we get some insights...

Let's get right to it. First, Paul says very clearly in today's passage that he expected trials for disciples of Jesus. Verse three says, **“For you know quite well we are destined for them (these trials)” (1 Thess. 3:3)**. The trials, the challenges to your faith are going to come. You are even destined for them. This is quite different from what many Christians believe, perhaps because we've been taught that the Christian life is “the blessed life” and “blessed” has been defined as the good, easy, prosperous life – usually meaning

monetarily or materialistically prosperous, free of pain. This is *not* what the Bible tells us, as we see in this passage. They, and now we, are destined for trials.

And by the way, Jesus himself tells us to expect trials. For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount, right near the start, he says, **“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness [that is, righteousness that stems from following Jesus], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Jesus, in Matthew 5:10-12).** Paul said some similar things back in chapter 2, you might recall, connecting their present-day suffering to the suffering of the prophets of old.

Notice what the “blessed life” is for a Jesus follower: one of persecution, insults, false things said about us because of our connection to Jesus. It occurs to me, that Jesus’ marketing plan was really bad. No church has a mission of “helping you get more insults, and false things said about you.” But Jesus is honest; he tells it as it is. So, expect trials that will seek to rock your faith and knock you off the foundation of Jesus and his Word. This is what we sign up for, and if you’re a non-believer you might wonder just how crazy us Jesus followers are, and yet we also invite you to join with us. 😊

But here’s the thing: when you expect trials, you’re not caught off guard when they come. You can take steps to be prepared. It’s kind of like the weather in Seattle: we *expect* grey clouds and rain. We don’t expect that every day is going to be sunny and 80 degrees or even sunny and 60 like we had this week a couple days. Instead, we expect it’s going to be colder than we’d like, grey clouds, and probably raining. And, though we truly don’t have those days *all the time*, even if we like to tell people we do...when they come, we’re ready. We don’t live in fear of those days, but when they come, we’re equipped – water proof boots, raincoat, maybe even an umbrella, especially if you moved here from somewhere else. We native Western Washingtonians don’t use umbrellas, right?

Similarly, if we *expect* and *anticipate* that trials to our faith will come at some point, then we're more prepared for them when they do. This doesn't mean you should look for or expect trials around every corner and under every rock...that's not healthy. But we should also not be lulled into believing that the Christian life, *really living*, is a trial-free one. We can be prepared for them. And when life *is* going smoothly – like a spiritual version of the sunny, 80-degree day we get once a year around here – we can more fully rejoice in and appreciate those times and see them for the incredibly joyous occasion that they are.

So, trials will come. Expect them — and be prepared. How do we get prepared and then weather the trials when they hit? Being prepared and weathering the trials actually require the same things. First, know your Scripture. Don't fall for false statements like God won't give you more than you can handle. We already talked about that. Second, acknowledge you can't handle it and lean into God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and third, lean into the disciples of Jesus he's put in our lives: the Church. **We lean into God and his family...our family of faith, the church.** That's how we prepare for the trials, *and* it's how we weather them and can even experience abundant life in them.

We see this in the passage. In verse 2 we see that Paul sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage the Thessalonian believers in the face of their trials, which Paul wrote about earlier, too. That word “encourage” is the same root word that Jesus uses in John 14 to talk about the Holy Spirit. The root word is “paraclete.” It means “helper” or “comforter” or “encourager.” **We need other believers to encourage/comfort us (to “paraclete” us) when we face trials.** And then we see in verse 7 that Paul is the one who is now encouraged by the Thessalonians. And he uses the same “paraclete” word in verse 7. Now *he's* the one who is encouraged, even as he is in the midst of facing his own trials for his faith. It's like the Holy Spirit, the paraclete (“comforter”), is embodied in us when we encourage someone else, or they encourage us.

And then verse 8 is the pinnacle of this, as Paul writes, **“Now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 3:8).** He and

his companions “really live” not because they’re standing firm in their own pride and abilities and self-sufficiency, but because of the Thessalonians’ faith in Jesus and the fellowship and encouragement they offer to Paul. It all starts with Jesus, and grows from there as we live out our faith to encourage others, or as others live out their faith and encourage us.

You see, if you want to really live, if you want the abundant life that Jesus offers, it’s not going to be through the absence of pain and suffering. In fact, we should expect it. **Really living, living with abundance, is found through faith in Jesus and through the encouragement of other believers in your life – including, and maybe especially in, the trials.** That’s where Satan will seek to separate you from God, but don’t let him get a foothold. If the trial is one of temptation to sin, then flee from it. It’s a three-word sermon on that topic.

But when the trial is some kind of suffering, or a health issue, or a relationship thing, we want to turn to Jesus and turn to the church. You’re not in the trial alone – whether you’re in one now or it’s a year from now, or later. It starts with faith in Jesus, for sure. God reaches forth his hand from heaven to introduce you to grace. We start there, saying yes to Jesus and what he offers. And once you’re in that place of faith in Jesus, you need the Church. You need other believers who know you, who pray for you, who dive into scripture with you, who serve alongside you, and who comfort and encourage you when you face trials.

This also means, and we see it in this passage: **You will have opportunities to encourage others in their time of trial.** To be a paraclete to them. This is part of maturing as a disciple of Jesus: moving to a place of giving and serving as Jesus does, as well as receiving when we need it. Just like we see in this 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter, where Timothy goes on Paul’s behalf to encourage the Thessalonians, and now Paul is encouraged by them in the face of his own trials. It’s a two-way street as we all lead one another toward Jesus, into a deeper walk of discipleship with him. So, whether you need encouraging, or are in a place to be an encourager, let’s leave here this morning expecting trials to our faith, but being prepared for them by knowing Scripture rightly, and by being in relationship with Jesus and his church. And when the trials

come, we can lean into him and into each other to be encouraged and comforted in whatever it is we're facing. By doing that, we'll lead one another toward Jesus, and be a shining example for the world to see how to really live. Let's pray...Amen.