Strengthened and Encouraged in the Faith

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[0:00] If anybody would like a pen to take notes, if you've got paper with you, thanks Yelena. Yelena has some pens there, so they'll be passed round. So we're reading from 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, it's on page 1187, as we continue on our series through this book.

And I'll read it and then invite Alex up and I'll pray for him and we can hear God's words. So let's read together then.
1 Thessalonians chapter 2, starting at verse 17, on page 1187. Let's hear God's word to us.
But brothers and sisters, when we were torn away from you for a short time, in person, not in thought, out of our intense longing, we made every effort to see you.
For we wanted to come to you. Certainly I, Paul, did again and again, but Satan stopped us. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes?
[1:23] Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens.

We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker, in spreading the gospel of Christ to strengthen and encourage you in your faith so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.
You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.
For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.
Alex, I don't think you need an introduction, so I'm just going to pray for you. Let's pray.
[2:36] Our Father God, we thank you again for the opportunity to hear your word. Thank you for those who you have gifted and enabled to speak it.

We pray for Alex now that he might know the strengthening of your Holy Spirit. We pray that you would help him to communicate clearly and that he would be resting in you.
And we pray for ourselves that we would be hearing what you are saying, being changed, being transformed, and ultimately being encouraged and strengthened.
We pray this in Jesus' name for his glory. Amen. Thanks, Johnny. Well, it's still good morning, so good morning, everyone.
Thank you.
[4:05] Thank you. Thank you.

and Dad. Well, my first term in college, this says dear Mum and Dad, well my first term of college has gone fairly well. Life up here in the city is a bit different from home, but I'm adjusting well and settling in now. The course itself is so different from the Leaving Cert, but at least it's what I want to be studying, I think. Although I do hope it'll get a bit more practical next year. There's a good hockey club up here, and I have made one of the teams, and so I'm making friends through that and getting exercise other than the five-mile cycle commute every day. We won our first few league matches earlier in the season, but we've started to drag our heels a bit now. I think the social aspect is affecting some of the performances. Well, that's the news for now. I hope you're all well at home and the cat hasn't eaten the dog yet. I'll be back for Christmas in a couple of weeks after these exams. Much love, your son.
That's a standard letter home from college. A child touching base with his parents after leaving the big bad world of third-level education, where we learn more than just our course material.
There's nothing standoutish about this letter. The boy is alive. He's adjusting to the faster pace of life. Study is okay. He's socializing a bit. Although we're not 100% sure how involved he is in the socializing that is affecting the hockey team's performances. And he's getting exercise. So as

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parents, are we glad to get this letter? Or email? Yes, we are. But there's still so much that's unknown.
We don't know if he's eating properly, sleeping properly, making all his lectures, managing his finances properly. And if we are Christians today, if we are followers of the Lord Jesus, then we would also like to hear that he is doing well in his faith. That he has found a good Bible teaching church to go to. That he has met other believers on campus, and he is praying for opportunities to share his faith with his classmates, housemates, and teammates. We would want to know that when faced with the busyness of life in the city, the distractions and temptations of university life, and the freedom of living away from his parents, that he would still love the Lord. Pursue him, and grow in the faith, in his faith in the Lord Jesus. There is a PS, but that'll come at the end of the letter, as all good letters do. So today our passage is 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 verses 17 through to chapter 3 verse 5. If you want to keep your finger in that, we'll be referring to it a lot.
[7:30] And Paul here is writing to his dear friends, who he loves. He is pained to be separated from them. We know this because he talks about it, being torn from them, and his intense longing to see them there in 17 and 18.

This pain, however, is not so much for their welfare, and him wanting their company. No. He wants, verse 2 of chapter 3, he wants to strengthen and encourage them in their faith.
And that's what we're going to be spending this morning looking at. Strengthening and encouraging them in their faith. This is Paul's desire for the church in Thessalonica, and I believe that that is his desire for this church in Cargilline too. That we would be strengthened and encouraged in the faith. Why? Well, he goes on to explain. So that no one would be unsettled by these trials. And later on we'll be looking a little bit more at those trials. But imagine back to the letter for a second. If there had been no letter home by the student having just left for the big city. There was no homing pigeon sent with news. There was no herald ordered to announce his news of survival. A parent would be concerned to hear from him and how he was getting on. And back in the time of Paul's writing it was no different.
Paul had had to leave Thessalonica unwillingly, and so now at the time of writing he hasn't heard from them and is concerned. Such is his concern that he is prepared to send Timothy to find out how they are and to strengthen and encourage them in their faith.
[9:22] He commends Timothy in his introduction as our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ. Timothy was only a young fellow at the time, so he may not have been taken seriously when he arrived there on his own. So perhaps this was Paul's way of breaking down any barriers there might have been so that the believers there would accept Timothy. But what a commendation he sends Timothy off with. God's fellow worker. Timothy is working with God to spread the gospel of Christ, which means both initial evangelism and also the nurture of the church.

So we're going to look at those two things now. Evangelism. It's the introducing people to the person of Christ, telling them why he came, died and rose again from the dead. And the reason Timothy is sent to continue the work started by Paul of introducing people to Christ. Carraghlein, our estate, Heronswood, Cork, the workplace, the world. We all need to hear this good news too, that Jesus Christ entered the world to offer us forgiveness from our rebellion against God and to offer us hope for today and for the forever future. We all need to hear this every day. Let's remind ourselves, each other, our families about this every day. We need to hear that good news daily.
And Timothy was also sent to nurture. The Oxford English Dictionary describes nurture as to care for and protect someone or something while they are growing. And this is also why Timothy was sent, to help grow in knowledge and love of Christ. These young Christians in Thessalonica were in danger of the tempter. We hear about the tempter there in verse 5.
So these young Christians in Thessalonica were in danger of the tempter leading them astray. They were also young in their faith, so they needed to be cared for and protected.
As a parent will anticipate the dangers that threaten their child, so too Paul anticipates the dangers lying ahead for his children in Thessalonica and sends Timothy to protect them.
[11:57] How does he do this? With the gospel. By encouraging them in their faith, he is discipling them, speaking the truth into their lives so that the tempter wouldn't deceive them with false promises of an easy life. This is absolutely key to this letter because Paul is getting to the very heart of the church. He doesn't say, oh, I heard you need a new praise time leader, or the rota has a few gaps in it, or you need help with the kids and the youth program. So I'm sending Timothy to help out

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a bit. Slot him in wherever you think is helpful. No, he is sending Timothy whose key purpose in life is all about spreading the gospel of Christ. To strengthen and encourage them and us in their faith. That's where Paul's priorities are for this church in Thessalonica, and I believe here in Cargilline too. Their faith and making it work out practically and encouraging them in it. Why is Paul so concerned about their faith? Have they not already heard the gospel of Christ? Been told of their need of a savior? Been encouraged to live a repentant life? Yes, they have. But faith is not a one-off. It's not a decision you make once and then carry on your life unaffected, but safely knowing that you will go to heaven when you die. He tells us in verse 3 of chapter 3, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.

We heard last week from Tom when he was speaking about these trials that they faced. And we know too from our own life's experiences that trials do come. To both believers and those who don't believe, life is hard. So trials are not a surprise. And Paul continues in verse 4 by saying that he had told them to expect to suffer and even to suffer for their faith. I'm sure Paul had often thought it would be much easier not to follow Christ, to go along with the crowd and live an easy, stress-free life as a tent maker.
Especially when he remembers back to his time before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, which we learn about in Acts 9 when he used to viciously persecute Christians himself. That was a much better life.
Life as a Christian is not easy. We always seem to be rowing against the tide or fighting an uphill battle. And that is why Paul is so concerned for these Christians in Thessalonica, because he knows how real the tempter is and how good he is at manipulating us into giving up or rebelling against God's rule.
Paul loves these believers like a parent. And so nothing is more important to him than their following Christ. And he wants to do everything that he can to ensure that they are not blown off course by the tempter, by Satan.
[15:16] Satan has already thwarted Paul's own plans to go and visit them. Chapter 2, verse 18 says, For we wanted to come to you. Certainly I, Paul, did again and again.

But Satan stopped us. So, here we have an illustration. Here we have two big bookends.
Both being satanic opposition. They nearly look satanic if you look at them closely. But they are satanic opposition. In verse 18, Satan is preventing Paul from visiting the church.
And in verses 3 and 4, Satan is trying to cast doubts in the minds of the Christians, to unsettle them.
Satan's biggest weapon is to prevent the spreading of the gospel of Christ.
So it shouldn't be a surprise to Paul or to us when trials or opposition or persecution comes. It stands to reason, therefore, that the best way to thwart Satan's plans is the spread of the gospel.
[16:36] And so... And so...

In between these two bookends of opposition is the good news. The gospel. Brought by Timothy. Sent by Paul.
To strengthen and encourage the Thessalonians in their faith. Here in Carragalline, or even in Ireland, as a church, we are very unlikely to face vicious persecution like our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world.
However, Satan is still at work. Casting doubts in our mind about God's sovereignty. Causing us to think about giving up on faith.
Or even just causing us to be so comfortable in our life that we start to think our lives are pretty good without God. And there's no need to change anything. Or let God disrupt our comfort.
[17:41] So how can you be a Timothy? How can I be a Timothy? If Satan is still at work, how can we strengthen and encourage each other? Well, how does Timothy do it to the Thessalonians?

Verse 2. He shares the gospel of Christ. So, when we meet for coffee during the week, we should be speaking of the good news of the forgiveness of sins.
The freedom that life in Christ gives us. When we meet up during the week for a one-to-one Bible study, and I encourage us all to do that if we can.
Or when we meet at Polo, we should study the Bible. Letting it mould and shape us. We should be praying its truths into each other's lives.
Challenging each other as to how we read it is affecting us in our lives. The more we hear of the gospel, the more we start to think it and let it affect how we think, how we make decisions, how we react to situations.

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[18:51] We should be making these times a priority in our week so that we can strengthen and encourage each other in the faith and therefore be strengthened and encouraged ourselves.

Maybe you feel more like a Thessalonian and you need encouragement.
I think we all are. When we meet at Growth Group, there is a great opportunity to share with each other how we are really doing. Where we can be vulnerable with each other and say how we struggle and pray for each other through those struggles.
When we chat over coffee, at half time during our Sunday morning service, do we really need to find out the score in the football match the night before? Or how long the kids slept for last night? Yes, it's important to share life with each other, even the small details. But when else is there an opportunity during the week to ask, how is your faith? How are you doing with God these days?
[19:56] Johnny's always encouraging us on a Sunday morning to make the most of that time in our service. And here we see the Bible saying the same thing. Paul's deepest desire was for the spiritual welfare of these believers.

So much so that he sent his right-hand man, Timothy, with the express purpose to strengthen and encourage them. When I was thinking this through in my own life, I was really challenged and rebuked that I don't feel this way.
I said goodbye to the Crusader kids back in May, and to be honest, I haven't given much thought to their faith since. I'm delighted to talk to many of you on a Sunday morning, but once Monday morning comes, I go into autopilot again, thinking about my work and my little life.
Is my or our deepest desire for the faith of others? Do we love to hear how each other is really doing?
Every time research seems to be carried out and people are asked towards the end of their lives, what do you regret most in life? Nobody ever says they wish they had spent more time working.
[21:20] Nearly everyone says they wish they had spent more time with their family. It seems to be that our kids and our relationships with people are the things that give us most pleasure and pride.

And so it is here with Paul and the Thessalonians. What an endorsement he gives them. Verse 19. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes?
Is it not you? Indeed you are our glory and our joy. You can see the pride that parents feel when their child takes their first step or says their first word.
And that's how Paul feels about this church. He is so pleased to have met them, to have taught them, and seen them come to faith, to know and to love them.
Paul can almost imagine himself before the Lord bringing the church with him as proof that he has been faithful in his calling as a missionary. His children or converts, those he introduced to Christ, were the source of his joy.
[22:35] Not because of anything Paul had done himself, but because of what Christ had done in the lives of these people. Paul pictures himself with the Thessalonians on the final day of judgment, being presented to the Lord Jesus, and he desperately wants them to grow and to be encouraged and comforted in their difficult walk with the Lord so that they will be with him on that day.

Do we have that same desperation? Are we eager to see each other, the crusader kids that we know, our friends, our neighbours, being presented before Christ when he comes again, standing beside us?
Do we love each other enough to call each other our crowning glory? As I was thinking through this during the week, I was struck by how often we talk about how being a Christian is all about a personal relationship with Jesus, or the lovely romantic notion that if I was stranded on a desert island, all I would need is the Bible and Jesus and I would be happy on our own forever.
Well, to be honest, that sounds quite miserable to me. I'm not good in my own company. Chris left last week for a couple of days and it was a great opportunity to spend time preparing this, but to be honest, it was miserable.
I'm not good in my own company. I need you. I need Christ working in my life through you, the church. I know I am weak and likely to be tempted by a seemingly easier life and without you, then I would fail and I suspect that I'm not alone in that feeling.
[24:27] It is through the church and the gospel that God works in my life, strengthening and encouraging me in my faith. I love that on a Thursday night I can go out and I can get a kicking in my shins from the same people who comfort and pray for me the night before in growth group.

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P.S. Mum and Dad, I can't believe I almost forgot. In Freshers Week I joined the hockey club, the skiing club, the friends of Star Wars Society, they call themselves the Jedi Sock, and the Christian Union.
I am weakly hearing the Bible taught with passion. I am making friends with these people and I think these are going to be friendships for life.
Some of them go to a church which is really close to where I'm living so we go there and hang out on a Sunday afternoon. No longer am I the little guy who had to quietly read his Bible in the toilets of boarding school.
Here I have people to read it with and study it with out in the open. The Christian Union is helped by a society called IFES Ireland and they have a catchphrase people not projects.
[25:50] It puts our focus on each other, our relationship with Christ and takes the focus off projects. I think that's a good motto for the life of the church too because without people loving each other as Christ loves the church then no project we take on can succeed.

So mum and dad life is good at the moment but I know that when it gets tough these same people will still be there encouraging me and reminding me of the risen Lord Jesus who loves me.
That letter although written last week as I prepared this could have been written 14 years ago when I started college in Dublin. I was a baby Christian although I had been a believer for a few years at that stage and going to the big city I could have easily fallen into the traps and pitfalls of student life.
Thankfully I got involved in the Christian Union I got involved in a small group with five lads and we met weekly to study the Bible. Four of us are still great friends and are still walking with the Lord and one sadly was caught by the tempter and is following the way of the world.
But we met regularly and study the Bible and encourage each other in our faith. That continues today when we see each other but it has to be intentional.
[27:17] It's not natural to go up to someone and ask them how their faith is or how are you doing with God these days. It doesn't flow easily but it is so important that that is why Timothy was sent by Paul.

As I finish it's helpful to recap first and then to look forward. As a church we need to be strengthening and encouraging each other in our faith at every opportunity.
If we don't the tempter will deceive us and coax us away from the Lord Jesus. We strengthen and encourage each other with the gospel.
Reminding ourselves that without Christ we are without hope and that with him we are promised life and fullness of life. So if you ask me how my faith is or how am I doing with God these days maybe you'll ask me later or maybe you'll ask the person sitting beside you or maybe you'll ask your spouse or your friend when you see them.
But from this passage faith is described as an awareness of the pitfalls Satan puts in our way but the resolve to spread the gospel of Christ to ourselves to strengthen each other and encourage each other so that we would all be presented together before Christ when he comes again.
[28:55] That would be our crowning glory. That would be our legacy. Let's pray. Father God thank you that you loved us enough to send Jesus to comfort us and to strengthen us.

Thanks too for each other for this church for the love and concern that there is in this church for each other. Please help us to do this more to be intentional in our conversations encouraging each other and strengthening each other in our faith.
Please help us to be always pointing each other towards the gospel that saves us. Thank you for your spirit that is with us to help us do these things which can sometimes feel alien.
And please help us to as we leave here today to have a desire to stand with each other on that final day presenting each other to you as your children.
In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.

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