

A Scriptural Church
1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:13

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In the Greek Islands, you can visit the home of Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, where you can find an olive tree that he supposedly planted over 2400 years ago.

The trunk is completely hollow with only a few long, straggling branches supported by sturdy wooden poles every few feet.

It has an occasional leaf here and there and might even produce a few olives each year. However, in the surrounding fields there are olive groves in every direction.

The strong, healthy, young trees with narrow trunks are covered with a thick canopy of leaves, under which masses of olives are produced each year.

The tree of Hippocrates can only be called an olive tree in that it still shows the essential characteristics, but it has ceased to fulfill an olive tree's function.

Each year, tourists line up to inspect this ancient relic, but the job of this tree passed long ago.

As such, there exists today many churches like the tree of Hippocrates. They've stopped bearing fruit; satisfied with just being big or having a noble history.

Thankfully, that wasn't the case with the church in Thessalonica. Unlike problem prone churches like Corinth, the church in Thessalonica was a glowing example of what the church should be.

That's why Paul praised them for being an energetic church, an elect church, an evangelistic church, and expectant church. In other words, a mighty church!

Today, as we continue our study of 1 Thessalonians, we discover three more marks of a mighty church!

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First, we find that a mighty church is a Scriptural church. Which reminds me of a story.

A new minister was asked to teach a boys' class in the absence of the regular teacher. He decided to see what they knew so he asked, *"Who knocked down the walls of Jericho."*

All the boys denied having done it, and the preacher was appalled by their ignorance.

At the next deacons' meeting he talked about his experience saying, *"Not one of them knows who knocked down the walls of Jericho."*

All the deacons were silent until finally one seasoned veteran of disputes spoke up.

"Preacher, this appears to be bothering you. But I've known those boys since they were born and they're good boys. If they said they didn't know, I believe them. Let's just take some money out of the maintenance fund, fix the walls, and let it go at that."

Now, there's a church that needs to spend a little more time in the Bible!

But the church in Thessalonica was different. Paul praised the Christians for their love of God's Word.

1 Thessalonians 2:13, *“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.”*

The church in Thessalonica was built on God’s Word. They accepted the apostle’s teaching as the Word of God. It became the foundation of their faith and practices.

In other words, they were a Scriptural church. And, as Bible-believing Christians, we continue to follow in their footsteps.

On our website you can read our statement of faith, which says, among other things, *“The Bible is the Word of God. It was written by men, Divinely inspired, and is the record of God's revelation of Himself to man. It has God as its Author, salvation for its end. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and is perfect truth.”*

If we want to be a mighty church, our beliefs, our worship, and our traditions must be tethered to Scripture. But notice, the Thessalonians didn’t just accept God’s Word, they applied it to their lives.

Paul said, *“the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.”* Paul knew that God’s Words aren’t mere sermons or documents, but a real source of transforming power.

Some of you may be familiar with the story of mutiny on the Bounty. The English ship Bounty, commanded by Lt. William Bligh, journeyed to the South Pacific in 1787. Many sailors signed on considering the voyage a trip to paradise.

Docking in Tahiti, the Bounty stayed there for 6 months where the crew enjoyed paradise to the fullest. But, when the time came to return home, the crew staged the most famous mutiny in history.

The mutineers, led by Fletcher Christian, set Bligh and his supporters adrift in an overloaded lifeboat. The mutineers aboard the Bounty immediately began quarreling about what to do next.

Some returned to Tahiti, kidnapped some women, took some slaves, and then traveled a thousand miles to the uninhabited Pitcairn Island.

On this little island, the group unraveled and even began distilling whiskey from a native plant.

Drunkenness, disease, and murder took the lives of all men except for one—Alexander Smith, who found himself as the only man on the island surrounded by an assortment of women and children.

Then an amazing change occurred. Smith found the Bounty's neglected Bible. As he read it, he took its message to heart, and then began instructing the little community.

He taught the colonists the scriptures and helped them obey its instructions.

The message of Christ so transformed their lives that twenty years later, in 1808, when the ship Topaz landed on the island, it found a happy society of Christians living in prosperity and peace; free from crime, disease, and murder.

The Bounty's Bible now resides on display in the church in Pitcairn as a monument to its transforming message.

The Bible we hold in our hands is full of real living power. Its words are transforming lives all over the world every day.

That's why it's so important for us to read our Bibles. The more we get into God's Word, the more God's Word gets into us.

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Then, as Paul continues through chapter two, he writes in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15a, *“For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out.”*

Just as Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were persecuted by their fellow Jews, the Greek and Roman Christians in Thessalonica were being persecuted by their fellow Romans.

From verbal harassment to hanging, persecution for professing faith in Christ is as old as Christianity itself. Jesus even warned His disciples that persecution would come.

And, as Christianity spread, a tide of resentment, hatred, and open opposition rose. Apostate Jews aligned themselves with Romans officials in an attempt to wipe out Christianity.

Under the authority of emperors like Nero and Domitian, Christians were hunted, killed by the sword, thrown to the lions, crucified, and even burned alive to give light to Roman revelries.

Unfortunately, modern martyrdom is no less frequent. Today, Christians are the single most persecuted religious group in the world.

Each month over 300 Christians are killed for their faith around the world, over 200 churches and Christian properties are destroyed, and over 700 forms of violence (such as beatings, abductions, rapes, and arrests) are committed against Christians.

According to the United States Department of State, Christians in more than 60 countries face persecution from their governments or surrounding neighbors simply because of their belief in Jesus Christ.

A few years ago, an angry mob of Muslim extremists attacked a Bible camp at the Station Field Complex of Pattimura University in Indonesia.

They terrorized the group of children and teenagers and dragged a fifteen-year-old boy, Roy Pontoh, before the mob. *“Renounce your Jesus, or we’ll kill you,”* they shouted. Terrified and trembling, Roy answered, *“I am a soldier of Christ!”*

At that, one of the Islamic assailants swung a sword across Roy’s stomach, tearing into the Bible in Roy’s hands and ripping it to shreds. The next swing took his head and ended his life. The last word to fall from his lips was Jesus.

Amazingly, despite violent opposition, the church isn’t losing ground in these nations. It continues to grow even in the most hostile environments.

The same was true in Thessalonica. Even in the face of persecution, the church thrived.

While I praise God that we don’t face this kind of persecution here in the United States, it begs the question: Would you be willing to suffer for your faith in Jesus?

Would you go to prison before you quit going to church? Would you be burned at the stake before you burned your Bible?

C.S. Lewis once said, *“You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you.”*

Regardless of their suffering, the Thessalonians remained firm in their faith.

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Finally, despite suffering for their faith, the church in Thessalonica was a strong church—a steadfast church.

Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 3:4-5, *“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 had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.”*

Paul worried that the Christians in Thessalonica might lose their faith under pressure.

1 Thessalonians 3:2-3, *“We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God’s service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them.”*

But his spirit is lifted when Timothy returns with good news.

1 Thessalonians 3:6-8, *“But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love... Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.”*

I pray, Lord willing, that our church will never face the kind of persecution the Thessalonians faced.

But every Christian faces trouble. In John 16:33b, Jesus reminded His disciples, *“In this world you will have trouble.”*

This is as true for us today as it was for them. Maybe everything’s going your way right now. Maybe life couldn’t be better.

But in an hour or a day or a week or month, maybe next year or the year after that, the bottom's going to fall out and trouble's going to come your way.

Someone once said, *"Trouble is like home. Either you're there, going to it, or coming from it."*

Sometimes, when trouble comes our way, our faith is shaken. That's why Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica and that's why we have each other!

When we stand together, we stand stronger. A strong church is one where its members strengthen and encourage one another.

In an old Peanuts comic-strip, Lucy strolls into the room and demands that her brother Linus change TV channels.

"What makes you think you can just walk right in here and take over?" asked Linus. *"These five fingers,"* said Lucy.

"Individually they are nothing, but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they become a force to be reckoned with."

Linus sighed, *"What channel do you want?"* Then turning away, he looked at his own fingers and asked, *"Why can't you guys get organized like that?"*

That's why a mighty church is a church that stands together. A church that supports one another during life's difficulties, so that when trouble comes our faith won't be shaken.

Like the Thessalonians we must help each other remain strong in the faith and stand firm in the Lord.

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Conclusion

As I said in the beginning, many churches today bear a resemblance to Hippocrates's olive tree.

They may be big or have a noble history, but on the inside they're hollow. They no longer bear fruit. They no longer bear the marks of a mighty church.

My prayer is that this will never be true of Grace Fellowship. May we always continue to bloom and follow in the footsteps of the Thessalonian church.

Thessalonica, a scriptural church willing to suffer for Christ, proved to be a strong church standing firm in the Lord.

If you're looking for a church family that bases their beliefs and practices on Scripture; that's willing to suffer if need be, and that stands together supporting one another and encouraging each other through life's trials and trouble, I invite you to become a part of Grace Fellowship.

We're looking for mighty members that will help us become a mighty church.