

Endurance

There are times in the Christian life when we all must choose to move forward, whether the obstacles are frightening, painful, lonely or the immediate goal is unclear.



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In 1 Corinthians 9:24-25, Paul describes life as a race that requires self-discipline and a focus on the goal, a crown that never fades. In Luke 9:62, Jesus tells us that anyone who takes hold of the plow but looks back isn't fit for God's kingdom. There is a lot of ground to cover between the moment you give your life to Christ and finally come to the "goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14).

The young Christians in Thessalonica needed encouragement in their spiritual race because Paul, their teacher and encourager, had been chased out of their city in the night (Acts 17:5-15). Although Paul had sent Timothy to check on them and encourage their faith, Paul writes that this "separation" from his "brothers and sisters" is "physical but not in our hearts" (1 Thessalonians 2:17). The Greek word Paul uses for "separation" means "to be orphaned." Paul is not merely a hard-hitting doctrinal evangelist; he is a deeply caring shepherd for these people who long to be with him as they grow and serve Christ in a dangerous world.

We who serve Christ in the 21st Century know about the barriers and tragedies of this world because our media outlets inundate us constantly with violence, injustice and death. Paul knows that Christians can be "shaken" by the problems we face (1 Thessalonians 3:3) and that temptation shows up for all of us (v. 5). He is absolutely joyous that Timothy has reported the good news about their faithfulness and love, and that they want to see Paul as much as he wants to see them

(v. 6). Clearly there is a mutual love and respect between the church and Paul, evident when he is "encouraged in all our distresses and troubles through your faithfulness" (v. 7). That word "encouraged" comes from a Greek verb carrying the idea to exhort, urge or comfort. This idea is common in Paul's letters.

These ancient but always relevant and inspiring words remind me of my seminary church, First Baptist Church of Megargel, Texas. I was their pastor for four years and I believe they taught me more about how to be a pastor than any book or class. That church closed its doors two years ago as the little town faded away. I went back last year to visit with a successful rancher I baptized when he was in grade school. We walked the foundation of the now-gone church and talked about the lives changed by God in that place, lives now scattered in witness across the world.

Two thousand years later we are reading words of love and encouragement connecting Paul and the young Christians of Thessalonica. Their story helps us face the inevitable challenges of life and stay focused on the goal of Christ.

Do Paul's words about being separated (orphaned) from the Thessalonian Christians remind you of a time when you have been separated from your faith family? Sometimes the sadness of separation comes when we move from one community to another because of school, a job change or a tragedy.

Because of my calling, I have moved many times to many places. Leaving a church has never been easy, even knowing the move was God's call. I never stopped loving people in a former church, but God always filled my life with new people to love and new challenging experiences. My memories, as well as my prayers, for those I have known along the journey still fill up my life.

Formations

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Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:17; 3:1-13

Paul mentions "problems" and that we are "meant to go through this" (v. 3). What has discouraged you or challenged your faith the most? Are you overwhelmed by news reports, the nasty rhetoric of this election, the ugliness of poverty and racism? Undergirding Paul's words in this letter is the idea of God's faithfulness in every circumstance, whether we are separated from loved ones or struggling with what seem to be impossible circumstances. Paul never offers trite religious answers, but points us to the Christ who was intimately familiar with suffering and injustice.

We learn from Paul and the brothers and sisters to whom he wrote that we must love and encourage one another. In Christ, in spite of our differences, we can come together as one family created out of God's grace through Jesus Christ. I have preached in churches across our nation, in foreign lands, in communities of varying social status...and have found in each of them God's family and God's Spirit at work. My heart has been blessed and encouraged by those who have known more heartache and adversity than I.

Be encouraged, find new strength, and endure the challenges of life as you read Paul's prayer: "Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus guide us on our way back to you. May the Lord cause you to increase and enrich your love for each other and for everyone in the same way as we also love you. May the love cause your hearts to be strengthened, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his people. Amen" (vv. 11-13).

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.