On the Edge of Faith  
(1 Thessalonians 3:9, 10)  
by  
David Roper

Do you remember the rich young ruler who came to Jesus? He asked the question, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answered, “Keep the commandments.” The young ruler said, “All these have I kept from my youth up. What lack I yet?”  

Each one of us needs to ask his question. We have a basic interest in spiritual things. Most of us are members of the body of Christ. But, we are not perfect (Romans 3:23). Each one of us needs to ask, “What lack I yet?”  

The Bible speaks of spiritual “lacks.” We may lack physical health, money, or popularity. But these, though important at the moment, are not crucial matters. A spiritual lack, however, is serious.  

The young ruler did not lack material possessions. He did not even lack outward obedience. He lacked something in the heart. He needed the ability to commit himself to the Lord fully and totally.  

What lackings might we have? Proverbs 6:32 speaks of a lack of understanding; Hosea 4:6, a lack of knowledge; Philippians 3:20, a lack of service; James 1:5, a lack of wisdom; 2 Peter 1:9, a lack of the Christian virtues. The lack we want to concentrate on in this study is found in 1 Thessalonians 3:9, 10:  

For what thanksgiving can we render again unto God for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God; night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face, and may perfect that which is lacking in your faith?  

Lacking in faith! What a crucial lack! The Bible speaks of the necessity of faith. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him.” John 8:24 says, “I said therefore unto you, that except ye believe I am he ye shall die in your sins.” Second Corinthians 5:7 says, “For we walk by faith, not by sight.”  

Revelation 2:10 uses the word faithful: “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life.” The English word faithful just means “full of faith.” “Be thou ‘full of faith’ unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life.”  

What is faith? My desk dictionary uses words like loyalty, trust, reliance, and so on. All this is involved in biblical faith, but there is much more. Biblical faith is the total commitment of our lives to the Lord. Faith says, “I trust you completely and my life is placed in your hands.” The letters F-A-I-T-H have been used as an acrostic to convey the meaning of faith. “Forsaking All I Trust Him,” or, “Forsaking All I Take Him,” or, “For All I Thank Him.” All of this conveys the idea of commitment. The biblical definition is found in Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen.” Faith sees the invisible, believes the incredible, and receives the impossible.  

Faith is so tremendously important, and yet, Paul said the Thessalonians were “lacking in faith.” Perhaps this may be our own situation.  

Let us go to the story of the Thessalonians in 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Acts 17:18. Let us try to understand what Paul is saying in 1 Thessalonians 3:9,10 and then make an application to ourselves.  

I. THE THESSALONIANS’ LACK OF FAITH  

The Establishment of the Church  
Paul was on his second missionary journey. He had arrived in Troas and received the Macedonian call (Acts 16:9). This call opened up a new area for the gospel. This area became very special to Paul. He had always had a special sentimental, emotional attachment to Macedonia. Three of the letters he wrote were addressed to
churches in this region. This was the area that again and again sent support to him as he traveled to other locales. If you want to know the great faith that these brethren had, read 2 Corinthians 8:1–5 as Paul speaks of them giving beyond their means.

He crossed the Aegean Sea to that area. Working first in Philippi, he traveled one hundred miles to Thessalonica. Thessalonica was a seaport town, the most important town in all of Macedonia. It was a rich and wicked city. Immediately south of Thessalonica were the snow-clad mountain peaks of Olympia, which, according to Greek mythology, was the home of the gods. The worship of the gods included immorality and wickedness in the temple worship.

Paul, first of all, went to the synagogue, as was so often his custom. He began to preach to the Jews and received little response among them. The Bible says, “That some of them believed” (Acts 17:4; italics mine). But the Bible says of the Greeks, the Gentiles, “a great multitude” believed (Acts 17:4). Sometimes we quote Acts 17:11 and leave the impression that he did not receive a good response at Thessalonica. That verse says, “These [at Berea] were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether these things were so.” The “these” this verse is referring to is not just the general populace, but the Jews. When Paul later went to Berea, the Jews were more responsive in Berea than the Jews at Thessalonica. But the Gentile population in Thessalonica was very responsive.

The first few chapters of 1 Thessalonians speak of this receptivity. In 2:13, Paul says, “When ye received from us the word of the message, even the word of God, ye accepted it not as the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the word of God.” In 1:9, he wrote that their receptivity was not simply an outward receptivity: “Ye turned unto God from idols.”

Luke mentions that Paul disputed and discussed in the synagogue for three Sabbath days. We do not know how long he was in Thessalonica, but it could not have been a long time. The Jews became extremely jealous, causing a riot. Unable to find Paul and his company, they found other brethren and dragged them before the officials. When the brethren were released, they were fearful for the lives of Paul and his company. They took them out of town and brought them to Berea.

**Paul’s Concern**

When Paul arrived in Berea, he was concerned about the brethren in Thessalonica. He had left behind babes in Christ. According to 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul had given them some spiritual gifts; he had laid his hands on some of them (v. 20). But these new converts were not Jews who had the background in Scripture and the maturity as some Paul converted on the first missionary journey. They had little or no knowledge of God’s Word. Though they had some miraculous gifts, they did not have the background to use the gifts to the fullest. Paul was concerned.

One writer says, “This shows us the heart and the concern that apostles had for those they converted to Jesus Christ.” Many times we do not have the concern we should for those whom we baptize. As someone has said, “We dip them and then drop them.” But Paul was concerned.

Notice 1 Thessalonians 2:17, 18. Paul said,

> But we, brethren, being bereaved of you for a short season, in presence not in heart, endeavored the more exceedingly to see your face with great desire: because we would fain have come unto you, I Paul once and again; and Satan hindered us.

Paul was in Berea. He could not get back to Thessalonica. He could not help the brethren. He was greatly concerned!

Paul left Silas and Timothy behind and went on to Athens. Still his heart was concerned about the Thessalonians. What was happening to them? He wanted to come back. But he continued to be hindered and was not able to go to them.

**The Thessalonians’ Trials**

Finally, Timothy came to Paul. Timothy told him the worst. These new Christians at Thessalonica, had all kinds of problems. The pressures put on their baby faith were tremendous. We can surmise from 1 Thessalonians some of the problems they had: There was persecution by the Jews. More subtly, there was worldliness—the temptation to go back to the idolatry, the worldly ways that they had known in days past. Finally, there was the false teaching of people perverting the teaching of Paul about the
second coming and other matters. One can imagine Paul’s concern reaching a fever pitch. “Is their faith going to be able to stand the test?” he would be asking.

In 1 Thessalonians 3, Paul says:

Wherefore when we could no longer forebear, we thought it good to be left behind in Athens alone; and sent Timothy, our brother and God’s minister in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith; that no man be moved by these afflictions; for yourselves know that hereunto we are appointed. For verily, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we are to suffer affliction; even as it came to pass, and ye know. For this cause I also, when I could no longer forebear, sent that I might know your faith, lest by any means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor should be in vain (vv. 1–5).

Paul knew their faith was young and vulnerable, so he sent Timothy to them.

The Good News

After working in Athens for a period of time, he went on to Corinth. There, finally, both Silas and Timothy met him. The word Timothy brought was good news. So far, their faith was surviving. This is that glad moment in which Paul sat down to write the 1 Thessalonian letter. It had probably only been about six months since that little congregation was established. He was thrilled and excited about how their faith had stood the test thus far.

You can feel Paul’s excitement as he begins the letter. Verse 1 says, “Paul, and Silvanus, and Timothy, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.” Verse 3 says, “Remembering without ceasing your work of faith and labor of love and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father.” Verses 7 and 8 say, “So that ye became an ensample to all that believe in Macedonia and in Achaia. For from you hath sounded forth the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith to God-ward is gone forth; so that we need not to speak anything.”

If you and I received those kind of words of commendation, we would tend to become puffed up. We would probably say, “Look at that! Our faith is known everywhere. How wonderful our faith is, how strong our faith must be, for it has encouraged people everywhere.” But let us get the whole picture. Paul did commend their faith. He said, “I am so thankful for your faith!” But now let us return to our text in chapter 3. Notice verses 9 through 13:

For what thanksgiving can we render again unto God for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God; night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and may perfect that which is lacking in your faith?

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way unto you: and the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we also do toward you; to the end he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Paul says, “Yes, you have had faith. I am thrilled at your progress, but I want to see you face to face.” Why? “That I may perfect that which is lacking in your faith.” (Italics mine.)

The Meaning of Perfect

The word perfect basically means complete. It is an interesting word in the original. It is used of physical things by Matthew to refer to mending nets. Imagine the holes in the nets. Sometimes a string breaks and suddenly the hole is twice as big. Only a few strings have to break for the holes to become so large that the fish can go straight through. Matthew speaks of filling the gaps in a net, completing the net. Using this figure, one paraphrase has Paul saying to the Thessalonians, “We want to fill up the cracks in your faith.” The same Greek word is also used spiritually in Ephesians 4:12. Speaking of the Christian’s need for service, the NASV refers to “equipping” the saints for that service. Think of a soldier with some of his equipment missing, or the craftsman not having all his tools. He needs those supplied to take care of the job that he is doing. This is the meaning suggested by the word perfect in 1 Thessalonians 3:10.

The phrase “what is lacking” in that same verse is from one word in the original and is in the plural. It could be translated “shortcomings” (plural). Putting together the word “perfect” and the phrase “what is lacking,” we have Paul saying, “Look. You have faith, but something is still missing.”

I can imagine someone responding, “That is insulting.” No, Paul has commended their faith. He is thrilled at the way they have stood against
the pressures, trials, temptations, and persecution, but he is saying, “You still need something else. You still need to grow, and I want to help you. I want to see you face to face to perfect, to complete, what is lacking.”

How Is Faith Developed?

The crucial question is this, “How is he going to bring about this completion?” We are not left to guess. Elsewhere Paul speaks of faith and tells us how faith comes. He says in Romans 10:17: “So belief cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” Paul says he wishes he was with them. No doubt, he wanted to continue to teach them God’s Word. This is the same sort of concept presented by Peter when he said in 2 Peter 1, “Yea, and for this very cause adding on your part all diligence, in your faith supply virtue; and your virtue knowledge.” You can never say, “I have it made.” You have to keep on growing. Paul says, in effect, “I want to give you more knowledge concerning God’s Word.”

A corollary exists to that truth which Paul did not neglect. You will not have a strong faith until your faith obeys. James stressed in James 2:20 that faith without works is dead. Paul constantly emphasized that it is through the Bible that faith comes. He also stressed that if faith does not obey it is worthless. We have read from 1 Thessalonians 1:3 where Paul commended their “work of faith.” In Galatians 5 Paul says, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith working through love” (v. 6). Paul wanted to see them: “Your faith is lacking. I want to see you to teach you God’s Word and encourage you to obey it.”

The Content of His Letter

History reveals to us, however, that it was three or four years before Paul saw them face to face on his third missionary journey. What did he do in the meantime? He wrote the first Thessalonian letter. He could not see them as he desired, therefore in this letter Paul does what he would have done had he seen them. First of all, he teaches them. He teaches them about love, the second coming of Christ, worldliness, and idolatry. Second, he encourages them to obey. Look, for instance, at 4:1, 2:

Finally then, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as ye received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, even as ye do walk,—that ye abound more and more. For ye know what charge we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

He says, “Here is how you ought to live and walk. Abound in this. Do it more exceedingly as time goes by.”

Although he could not see them face-to-face, sending them a letter worked. A short time later he wrote a second letter to the Thessalonians. Notice what he said in 1:3: “We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren, even as it is meet, for that your faith growth exceedingly . . . .” They had not reached perfection. As you read 2 Thessalonians, you will see that they still had false ideas about the second coming of Christ and other truths, but they were on their way and their faith was growing. McGarvey tells us that the church at Thessalonica was the bulwark of the faith in the east for literally centuries. Apparently, their faith continued to grow.

II. OUR LACK OF FAITH

What About Our Faith?

Now let us come to ourselves by making an application. There are many points to be made from 1 Thessalonians 3:10, but surely the most important lesson for each of us is that regardless of how far we have gone in our faith, we still have a long way to go. Instead of sitting here saying, “Men could commend my faith for my faith is known to others,” we need to say, “Here is the lack in my life.” I hope we have a grasp of the biblical teaching on grace. God’s grace is going to supply that which we cannot. But at the same time, we need to strive to do what we can and become what we can be.

As we make that self-examination, let us finally ask: What about our faith? Is it possible Paul could make a similar statement to us as he made to the Thessalonians? Could he speak of that which is lacking in our faith?

An Illustration

When I began working on this topic, immediately a Bible story from the life of Christ came to mind (Mark 9). Jesus had been with the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, a wondrous occasion on which Jesus was transfig-
ured with Moses and Elijah. Coming down from the mountaintop, he came immediately back to the problems of faith. He came to the rest of the disciples gathered around a man who had a son with an unclean spirit—an unclean spirit that made the son have seizures and other terrible things. The disciples said, “We cannot heal this one.” Jesus looked at the man with the son and spoke to him concerning faith, “If thou canst believe, all things are possible” (v. 23). Do you remember what the father replied? “I believe; help thou mine unbelief”! (v. 24).

“Help My Unbelief!”

Jesus healed the son, but what about those words, “I believe. Help thou mine unbelief”? It is my understanding that these are the words inscribed on the tomb of William Jennings Bryan in the Arlington National Cemetery. They very well could be words that could be inscribed on all our lives: “I believe. Help thou mine unbelief.” I am sure all of us believe. Most of us have enough faith to be baptized into Jesus Christ. Faith is present. But is it not also true that that faith is under attack? I mentioned the attacks coming to the Thessalonians’ faith. Similar attacks come to us concerning faith. For instance, there is outright persecution, though it may not come in the same way it came in the first century. Today it generally comes as ridicule.

The other day I was talking with a man who said, “I was raised in a religious environment. More and more today I run across people who just smile and say, ‘Do you still believe that old stuff?’” That is persecution today!

There is the subtle pressure to make us a part of this world, to get us back into the old ways. Someone has said, “Isn’t it wonderful today? Our young people do not have to learn dirty words and worldliness from the gutter. They can sit in a nice, comfortable, air-conditioned theater and learn them, or sit at home in a comfortable chair in front of the television set watching HBO and learn them.” Pressures are around us to be like this world.

We also have false doctrine literally saturating the atmosphere.

If these pressures are not enough, there are just the ordinary pressures of life today: inflation, unemployment, the matter of day-to-day living, the breakdown of the home, rearing our children, etc. Yes, our faith is under attack. Most of us would have to say, “My faith sometimes gets just a little shaky.” Can any of us say, “At no point in my life has my faith ever wavered”? Would not many of us have to say, “I believe. Help thou mine unbelief”?

If Paul were to look at us today, might he not say, “I am thankful for your faith. I am grateful for what you have accomplished. It has been an inspiration to others on so many occasions. It has brought you to this point, but I wish I could see you to supply that which is lacking in your faith.”

Faith Must Grow!

It is so important for us to realize our faith must grow. It is entirely possible that some of us think, “I had enough faith to fulfill Mark 16:16: ‘He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.’” But the Bible speaks of faith growing. We have already noted 2 Thessalonians 1 where Paul spoke of their faith growing exceedingly. Again, in 2 Corinthians 10:15, 16, Paul says, “Having hope that, as your faith groweth, we shall be magnified in you according to our province unto further abundance, so as to preach the gospel even unto the parts beyond you.” Faith has the capacity to grow. Jesus once said to His disciples, “You ought to forgive seventy times seven.” When Jesus gave that challenge, the apostles knew exactly what they needed. The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith” (Luke 17:5).

How Does Faith Grow?

We come back to the question, How can our faith grow? I wish I could just give you a simple little formula, a few magic words that would cause our faith to grow. I even wish I could tell you, “Just go out somewhere and sit down and think about God and your faith will grow.” But it does not work that way. Any worthwhile accomplishment takes effort. Growing faith takes effort. Let us then come right back to the two points we have been trying to stress.

Number one, if our faith is to grow, we must supply that which is lacking in our faith, we must study God’s Word. Psalm 119:11 says, “Thy word have I laid up in my heart, that I might not sin against thee.” Someone said concerning that verse, “You have a good thing in a good place for a good reason.” A good thing—the Word; a good
place—your heart; for a good reason—that you might not sin against God. But how do you get the Word in your heart? It does not just come automatically. It comes by study, work, and effort.

Too many of us, I am afraid, want to start without a proper background. I know that talking about study is not a thrilling thing. If I were to say, "We ought to take the world for Christ" or "We ought to do this and that," we could get more excited! But do you know what happens if an individual gets busy for God and neglects the foundation? He burns out. Have you heard about the burn-out problem? You burn out if you do not have the strength within. You know I believe in being busy. You know I believe in being active for God. But you have to start with a foundation.

Imagine that I am hired to plant fruit trees. My employer is going to pay me $2 a tree. He figures I will plant four to six an hour. He shows me how to dig the hole with plenty of room for the roots. He shows me how to hold up the trees while I put in a special soil and pack it a certain way. Then he leaves me. He comes back in an hour expecting to see four to six trees planted. I have planted two hundred trees. I say, "You owe me $400." He says, "How did you do it? That is astonishing! How did you manage to plant two hundred trees in an hour." I said, "Easy. It suddenly struck me that the hard part of planting these fruit trees is the roots. But nobody sees the roots. They are not even pretty. I cut off all the roots. They are laying over there in a pile. I just planted the trunk. It does not take very long to stick the trunk into the ground—and that is what you see anyway." I think I would lose my $400-an-hour job very quickly! The man, if he wanted to take the time to explain it to me, might say, "Wait a minute. The roots are where you get the nourishment. The roots are the stability. The roots are what make the tree grow. Without the roots you have nothing!"

Prayer is important; working for God is important. The basis of Christianity, though, is God speaking to us through His Word, and the only way you can get that Word into your heart and have the foundation strength you need is to put some effort into the matter of study.

Study Is Not Optional

Not so long ago, a fellow preacher sat in an adult Bible class. About 150 people were present. (If anybody ought to study God’s Word, it ought to be those in an adult Bible class in the Lord’s church, right?) The teacher said, “Everybody that read the Bible every day this week hold up your hands.” Out of 150 people, three held up their hands. Note that the teacher did not ask, “How many of you studied the Bible?” He did not ask, “How many of you really read a great deal each day?” He did not say, “How many of you understood what you read?” He just asked, “How many of you opened the Book up at least once each day for a week?” Three held up their hands. The preacher reached this conclusion: “In the church we must think Bible study is optional. The super-spiritual do it, but it is optional.” Is it optional?

I have done some traveling over the past few weeks. Let me ask you this: Were directions optional as I traveled? Should I just take off and not look at signs, not look at a road map, not ask any questions? Directions are not optional if you want to get from one spot to another. The Bible is the only road map to heaven!

If you are engaged in a very hazardous occupation or sport, is protection optional? Do parents want their children to play football without pads of any kind? Protection is not optional. Do you know what the Bible says? “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of the world” (Ephesians 6:12). We must learn to use the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17). Protection is not optional.

If you want to live, is eating optional? Most of us like to eat. Some of us live to eat. We also have to eat to live. Eating is not optional if you want to continue living. But on the spiritual level, the Bible is our only source of food (1 Peter 2:2; Hebrews 5:12–14).

We need direction, protection, and nutrition. It comes spiritually from the Word of God. I know we are busy. But we are talking about that which is absolutely essential. A lady had this sign above her sink: “Worship services conducted here three times a day.” She was busy, but she had found a time and a place to think about God.

Study Is Work

When I talk about study, I am talking about
work. The Bereans searched the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:11). Paul said in 2 Timothy 2:15, “Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God.” Imagine that after a service I got down in one of the aisles, down on my hands and knees just looking around. You come up and say, “What are you doing?” I say, “Nothing, I just think that every day one ought to get down and look at the carpet.” You would probably say, “There is something wrong with this fellow!” But, on the other hand, if I said, “I am looking for a contact lens—or for a tie tack,” you might get down on your hands and knees and help me look. I would have a purpose in my search.

Some people open up the Word of God and say, “I have to read something today; I will read a couple of verses here and a couple there.” “What are you doing?” someone asks. “Nothing really. I am just looking at the Bible,” is the reply. Do you have purpose in your reading? We read to study the Book.

Faith Must Act!

But do not merely study it; do what it says also. Action strengthens our faith (James 2). In Matthew 7, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells of two builders. As far as we know the two builders had the same contractors. They could have had the same blueprints. They could have used the same building materials, had the same color scheme, had the same furnishings in the house, the same windows, the same doors, and the same roof-line. But after the storm was over one house is standing and the other is flattened. Why? One man built on rock; the other built on sand. Jesus said the one who built on sand is representative of the man who hears but does not do (vv. 26, 27). When the storms of life are past, he is gone. The other hears and does. His house, his life if you please, stands.

You cannot beat the philosophy of the cab driver in Ireland. He said, “Believe all that God says, and obey all that God commands. Then you can expect all He promises.”

CONCLUSION

Let us each look at ourselves. What about our faith? One individual said, “I feel as if I am always living on the edge of happiness.” Isn’t that sad? Close, but only on the edge of happiness. Someone commenting on the rich young ruler said, “He was on the edge of commitment.” That is even sadder. Close, on the edge, but not there. Is it possible that some of us might be on the edge of faith? We have come this far, but we have never really studied God’s Word, have never worked out our priorities to find the time to study, have never committed ourselves to doing the will of God no matter what the cost.

I hope you will go over the edge—over to God’s side.

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