

## New Hope Sermon God's Empowering Presence 1 Thess. 3:11-13

“In a 2016 interview in The New York Times, award-winning actor Ben Affleck reflected on the pressure to hide our broken areas. When he watches other movies that strain to make their heroes entirely likable and valiant, Mr. Affleck said: "I find that boring. Instead, I think it's interesting how we manage the best version of ourselves, despite our flaws and our weaknesses and our tendencies to do the wrong thing." The article noted, "[Affleck] has also realized that for all of his Hollywood success, some part of him will always feel like a relentless striver who must prove, through his work, that he has a right to be there." Affleck put it this way:

That [relentless striving] never goes away. All these habits that we develop, that help us at some point, they have flip sides. In this case, it's hard to turn that feeling off ... The urge of making it good and trying to make sure that it works, that you've done the most interesting version that you can—it's like a neurosis that drives me to work every day. *David Itzkoff, "Ben Affleck's Broken Batman," The New York Times (3-14-16)*

We are all broken people with neuroses who are striving to count, striving to be good, “to do the most interesting thing you can.” This is part of the ego sin nature. But that nature works exactly against victorious Christian living. For Christians, it is futile to try to prove ourselves to God. We accept His grace and empowerment by faith. We are victorious because of the Spirit in us and God's empowering presence. Our life center is all about God - not what we strive to be and do in our own neuroses.

This brings us to our text today:

*Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*

Notice Paul's confidence about who God is and the difference His empowering presence makes in our lives. On the basis of the character of God, Paul asks God to do 3 things for the Thessalonian believers.

1. First, may God clear the way for us to come to you—circumstantial guidance, responsibility in discipleship, God's sovereignty—God knows when people need support and encouragement and He sends others to them. “Clear the way” means make a straight, level path, removing all the obstacles. Remember, earlier Paul had said how much he and the others wanted to get back to the Thessalonians “but Satan hindered them.”(I thes.2:18). Now he is believing that God would remove Satan's obstacles and make it possible for them to get back to Thessalonica.

2. Second, May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else. The word “make” is better translated “inspire”. May God inspire your love to increase and overflow. The image is of “the sea coming into a tidal river that would flow strongly up the river, rising to the top of the banks and overflowing into the fields on either side” (R.A. Ward, commentary on 1+2 Thessalonians, Word, 1973, p. 90). Second Corinthians 5:14 says that Christ's love compels us to live for Him. In that process v. 16 “*we no longer regard anyone from a worldly point of view. We are made new creations and the old way of looking at God, looking at others and even looking at ourselves has been transformed.*” We can now see others with God's eyes and have God's agape love, which he pours into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). That love provides the glue that bonds the community of faith together and establishes our mark as Christians in the world. God's love in us. He increases it. He upholds it, He makes it overflow.

But that kind of love is costly and often causes us to love our enemies in ways that are the opposite of how the world acts:

“In December 1943, German fighter pilot Franz Stigler was in pursuit of American bomber pilot Charlie Brown's plane, looking to shoot it down. If he did, it would earn him the Knight's Cross,

the highest award for a fighter pilot. But as he approached, he realized that there were no tail guns blinking, no tail gun compartment even remaining, no left stabilizer, and the nose of the aircraft was missing.

Surprisingly, he could also see into the plane, the skin of it having been blown off. Inside, he observed terrified young men tending to their wounded. Stigler could not shoot the plane down. He had been trained that "honor is everything." If he survived the war, his superior officer told him, the only way he would be able to live with himself was if he had fought with as much humanity as possible. Stigler could tell that Brown didn't realize how bad a shape his plane was in. He gestured for Brown to land the plane, intending to escort him. But Brown had no intention of landing in Germany and being taken prisoner along with his men. Stigler then yelled "Sweden," meaning that Brown should land his plane there. But Brown didn't know what Stigler was yelling. Stigler saluted Brown and veered away. His last words to him were, "Good luck, you're in God's hands now."

Brown was able to land the plane in England. He continued his Air Force career for two decades, but remained obsessed with the incident. In 1990, he took out an ad in a newsletter for fighter pilots, looking for the one "who saved my life on Dec. 20, 1943." Stigler, living in Vancouver, saw the ad and yelled to his wife: "This is him! This is the one I didn't shoot down!" He immediately wrote a letter to Brown, and the two then connected in an emotional phone call.

Stigler and Brown both died in 2008, six months apart. The article in the New York Post also noted that both men were Christians and that the obituaries for Stigler and Brown both listed the other friend as "a special brother." *Maureen Callahan, "Amazing tale of a desperate WWII pilot's encounter with a German flying ace," New York Post (posted 12-11-12)* Stigler "loved his enemy" and saved his life instead of earning the prestigious Knight's Cross for himself if he had shot Brown's plane down.

God's love is also evident as we live out the one another's of the Bible – *encourage one another, serve one another, love one another, be kind to one another, forgive one another*. Those are evidences that God's love is multiplying and overflowing in our lives. And they are in marked contrast to the one another's in how the world so often treats people. Pastor Ray Ortlund writes, "The lovely gospel of Jesus positions us to treat one another like royalty, but...in the world's system people: "scrutinize one another, pressure one another, embarrass one another, corner one another, interrupt one another, defeat one another, sacrifice one another, shame one another, judge one another, run one another's lives, confess one another's sins, intensify one another's sufferings, point out one another's failings" *Ray Ortlund, "One Another's I Can't Find in the New Testament," The Gospel Coalition blog (5-24-14)*.

God's agape love overflowing in us will put to death those kind of me-centered attitudes and actions, as it did for fighter pilot Stigler. Instead we learn to bless one another, not curse them. Have you ever thought of the power of blessing people in Jesus' name? It is definitely an act of Christian love. In the book *Christian Caregiving* Kenneth Haugk speaks of praying over people the blessing of God: "It is saying that God has you in his care and is responsible for your well-being...Such blessings or benedictions are remembering tools" (Augsburg Publishing, 1984, p. 124). In the Old Testament is the original Aaronic blessing the priests were to give to the people: "*The LORD bless you and keep you; 25 the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; 26 the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.*" Numbers 6:24-26. Paul takes this concept and gives this benediction to the Thessalonians at the end of this first letter to them: *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of Jesus Christ. The One who calls you is faithful and he will do it.*" I Thes. 5: 23-24

3. Paul's third prayer for them is based on God's commitment to believers' growth in holiness - when our inner attitudes of heart become more constant and our character can be transformed to be more like Christ. Paul prays that *God strengthen your hearts so you will be blameless and holy in the presence of God when Jesus returns*. The word "strengthen" is also translated "establish," the same word used in Colossians 2:6-7 **6** *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and*

*overflowing with thankfulness.* Maturity is “*the measure of the fullness of Christ where we are no longer tossed to and fro by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.*” (Eph.4:13-14). It is the ability to recognize “alternative truth,” to stay centered on Christ and not begin to major on the minors by becoming obsessed with various isms or political issues that obscure Christ. It is being able to hold onto the centrality of our faith when it is being assaulted - overtly in persecution or subtly by cultural pressures to squeeze believer’s into their culture’s or family’s mold.

Holding onto one’s faith takes strength of heart. Paul prays that God would strengthen these believers so that in persecution and trouble “*their foot does not slip.*” They are not “*unsettled by the trials*” and the tempter’s efforts to steal their joy, kill them physically or destroy their testimony, ultimately causing them to fail in their ministry and witness to the world.

Paul picks up this same theme of strength of heart in his letter to the Ephesians where he says we need to be strengthened so we can resist the enemy and stand against him. Eph. 6:11-13: <sup>11</sup> *Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.* <sup>12</sup> *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* <sup>13</sup> *Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.*

Notice that the word “stand” is repeated three times—verse 11 and twice in verse 13. When the enemy is attacking, it takes strength and courage to stand and resist. Peter says, “*We are not ignorant of the enemy’s devices.*” But it is one thing to recognize the enemy and another thing to resist. Paul is praying that God would strengthen the Thessalonians’ hearts, so they will be blameless and holy in the presence of Jesus when he returns. That holiness grows each time we resist the purposes and powers of the enemy.

The bottom line of these 3 prayers is that the Christian life does not fall on the shoulders of believers alone. It is all done through God’s empowerment. God deals with our circumstances—He’s the one who can “*clear the way*” for what He wants to have happen. God “*pours His love into our hearts*” by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5) so our love “*can increase and overflow for each other and everybody else.*” God strengthens us so we can stand and be preserved in holiness. Every other religion in the world puts the focus on the believer’s efforts—to keep the commandments, to keep the precepts, to keep the five pillars of Islam. It’s all based on the believer’s work to establish and maintain a relationship of any sort with whatever deity may be involved. Christianity is entirely different. It is God who does it all. We are to obey, surely, what God tells us and resisting is an example of that kind of obedience. But it is God who clears the way, God who pours His love, God who strengthens our hearts. As we live the Christian life by the power of God in us and around us, we can demonstrate that love in the world.

But the empowering presence of God goes hand in hand with community. The concept of community, *koinonia*, is key here because this is all written in the plural. God’s empowering presence is not just for individual believers, but for the church.

In fact, let me apply that corporate understanding just to the area of standing and resisting the enemy. When we are in the midst of a battle with Satan, we really need the whole community to stand with us, to pray for us, to resist with us and for us, even to give counsel that will help us recognize the enemy in places where we do not. This is where the admonition or warning of Spirit-filled people with discernment is essential to keep us from those areas where we are blind to our sin or wrongful preoccupation – with things, with false guilt, with a preoccupied involvement with social media which coopts our time so we take less and less time to listen to God and study his Word, with anxiety about finances or the future or the past. These are all areas where Satan can lure us away from a Christ-first

life of holiness and overflowing love to others. We need the community. In the New Testament times, soldiers fought back to back because there wasn't armor for their back. If they fled from an enemy, they could be killed. Their back was vulnerable. They fought back to back for protection and that's what we need to do. The Christian life is victorious when we rely on God's empowering presence lived out in community.

Listen again to Paul's threefold prayer:

*Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. **12** May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. **13** May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*

Beloved, this God-centered focus is wonderful news:

God is the One who enables us to live the Christian life by His Spirit. He clears the way for the connections we need with others in the Body of Christ. He gives us His love and strength. He can establish our hearts and make us holy. He is the Sovereign One who has won the victory over every force that would steal, kill and destroy our life. This is the good news which helps us lead the abundant life Jesus promised. Let us pray.

Our song of response today is a blessing - like we were talking about. It's one that the elderly people sing at the worship services I led at Belmont and Lexington Square Assisted Living Complexes. It's a benediction we can give to each other as a form of love, of commitment, and support. It's sung to the tune of Edelweiss. Here are the words:

May the Lord, mighty God, bless and keep you forever;  
grant you peace, perfect peace, strength in every endeavor.  
Lift up your eyes and see his face and his grace forever.  
May the Lord, mighty God, bless and keep you forever.