

“Out of Sight Faith”

I Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

Series: Thrive Week 3. Faith Unsinkable

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Out of sight is not always out of mind.

That’s especially true when you send a son or daughter away to college. Years ago a Mom and Dad received this letter from their daughter during her first semester.

Dear Mother and Dad:

It has been three months since I left for college. I’m sorry I have not written before now. I will bring you up to date.

I am getting along pretty well now. The skull fracture I received when I jumped from my dormitory window during the fire is pretty well healed. After two weeks in the hospital I can almost see normally and only get those headaches once a day.

A gas station attendant near the dorm called the Fire Dept. and the ambulance. He also visited me at the hospital and since I had nowhere to live he was kind enough to invite me to share his apartment with him. We have fallen deeply in love and are planning to get married. We haven't set the exact date yet, but it will be before my pregnancy begins to show. Yes, mother and dad, I am pregnant. I know how very much you are looking forward to being grandparents.

Now that I have brought you up to date, I want to tell you there was no dormitory fire; I did not have a skull fracture; I was not in the hospital; I am not pregnant; I am not engaged. However, I am getting a D in sociology and an F in chemistry; I want you to see these grades in proper perspective.

Your loving daughter,

Separations are difficult. You send a child off to college or a mission trip. Your spouse goes on a business trip. Your boyfriend or girlfriend is gone for the summer. Family or close friends move away. This Memorial Day Weekend reminds us of those who are separated from their loved ones while they serve our nation. When my wife Lisa and I were dating, she went off to college a year ahead of me. I still remember the pain that came with saying goodbye at the airport. “Distance makes the heart grow fonder” someone has said. My youth pastor used to add, “Yes, fonder...for someone else.” That made me worried. I wrote Lisa a letters almost every day so that while I was out of her sight, I wouldn’t be out of her mind. Decades later, we went to the same airport to put our daughter Kristin on a plane to Germany for a semester abroad. We were so fearful our baby would miss her connection in Amsterdam, that she would be delayed, that no one would be in Berlin to greet her. In fact, all those things happened. Yet our baby is a world-class traveler who always finds her way.

Some separations are more painful and permanent. There's the separation that comes when you clean out your desk, the separation that's finalized when you sign the divorce papers, the separation that's sealed at the graveside. The closer the relationship, the deeper it hurts. There's a longing, an ache, an emptiness.

We have a term for it: separation anxiety. Usually it's found during the childhood years. We see in the hallway every September during the first week of Preschool: there's crying, screaming, temper tantrums – and those are the parents. Let's face it: separation is difficult to face at any age. It seems the more some people and some situations are out of sight, the more they are on our mind. What's out of sight for you right now? Finding a job? Restoring your health? Paying off your debts? Healing your marriage? Reconciling a relationship? You are here. You want to be way over there. Between those two points there seems to be a bottomless chasm.

Believe it or not, the Apostle Paul struggled with his own version of separation anxiety. After he planted the seeds of faith in Thessalonica and saw the growth of new believers, he was forced to flee first to Berea and then Athens.

But, brothers and sisters, when we were torn away from you by being separated 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 blocked our way. (I Thessalonians 2:17-18)

Imagine that: even Paul, an apostle of great faith, feels some separation anxiety. As long as the Thessalonians are out of sight, they are never far from his mind. He fears they will give up the faith and fall back into their old ways. He is anxious they will succumb to temptation. Paul describes two realities every believer will face.

All Followers of Jesus Face Trials.

Paul tells the Thessalonians they shouldn't be surprised. He alerts them to this before he leaves town. Paul's desire is that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are 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. (I Thessalonians 3:3-4)

Paul knows the new believers are wrestling with persecution. They may be fired, shunned by neighbors, beaten by rioters, arrested by officials, cut off by their families.

This type of persecution still continues today. Asian Access, a Christian missionary agency, developed a list of seven questions. Before taking the step of baptism, new believers are asked to consider the cost of what they may face if they go public with their faith.

1. Are you willing to leave home and lose the blessing of your father?
2. Are you willing to lose your job?
3. Are you willing to go to the village and those who persecute you, forgive them, and share the love of Christ with them?

4. Are you willing to give an offering to the Lord?
5. Are you willing to be beaten rather than deny your faith?
6. Are you willing to go to prison?
7. Are you willing to die for Jesus?

These seven questions are a sobering reminder for all Christians around the world of what it *might* cost us to follow Jesus.¹ Yet rarely do Western Christians face such opposition. The greatest fear we face is people won't like us or think we are weird because of our faith. I'm not encouraging you to seek trials and persecution. I am also hesitant to say a trial comes from God. What I can say with confidence is what Paul tells the Thessalonians: trials of various kinds will come and God can use these trials to make us stronger. No one ever gets stronger at the gym by not exercising. Which moments in your life yielded the greatest growth? Probably the most challenging trials you faced.

Trials will come. The question is: will you run from them or stand up to them with the power of Jesus. Paul said about the Thessalonians:

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 Thessalonians 3:7-8).

Where do you need to take a stand for Jesus? At work, at school, in your neighborhood, in your family? Alan Paton tells the story of Robert Mansfield, the headmaster of a school in South Africa during the cruel system of racial segregation called apartheid.

When Mansfield's school was barred from competing against a black school, he finally took a stand against apartheid and resigned his post. A friend said to him, "You know you will be wounded. Do you know that?" Mansfield replied, pointing to heaven, "When I go up there ... the Big Judge will say to me, 'Where are your wounds?' If I say I haven't any, he will say, 'Was there nothing to fight for?' I couldn't face that question."²

Trials will come. Will you take the stand?

Why don't we face more of this kind of opposition? It's likely we are going with the current of our culture instead of against it. The second truth is **All Followers of Jesus Face Temptation.**

Paul writes, For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. 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. (I Thessalonians 2:18; 3:5)

¹ South Asian nation struggles to shape itself, Mission Network News (9-19-13).

² Alan Paton, *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful* (Scribner, 1996), pp. 66-67.

If Paul was blocked by Satan, if the Thessalonians were tempted by the tempter, then we should not think we are exempt. Just as there are physical trials which block our way, there are spiritual temptations which knock us down.

You don't hear much talk about the Devil these days but that does not mean he disappeared. I think C.S. Lewis says it best in preface to his book *The Screwtape Letters*.

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.³

The Devil is delighted if we disbelieve he exists. Then he can go about his business without our interference. In 2011 a study uncovered that Americans "often" or "sometimes" struggle with the following temptations:

- Worrying or being anxious—60 percent
- Procrastinating or putting things off—60 percent
- Eating too much—55 percent
- Spending too much time on media—44 percent
- Being lazy—41 percent
- Spending more money than they could afford—35 percent
- Gossiping about others—26 percent
- Being jealous or envious of others—24 percent
- Viewing pornography or sexually explicit material—18 percent
- Abusing alcohol or drugs—11 percent

41 percent said they tried to avoid giving in to a temptation. 59 percent said they didn't. When asked why they give in to temptations, the top four reasons were:

- I am not really sure—50 percent
- To escape or get away from "real life"—20 percent
- To feel less pain or loneliness—8 percent
- To satisfy other people's expectations of me—7 percent⁴

Some weeks ago you filled out and brought forward a card which describes the kind of help you need from God. Many of the struggles listed on those cards are found in this list of temptations. In response, we will offer a message series this summer on how to be free from the

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Harper Collins, 1996) ix.

⁴ Todd Hunter, *Our Favorite Sins* (Thomas Nelson, 2012), pp. 237-245.

Seven Deadly Sins of pride, anger, envy, greed, gluttony, lust, and sloth. God wants to help you fight and be free from temptation.

When it comes to temptation, Satan's most powerful approach is not the opposition of a trial but with the gentle comfort of enticement and pleasure. NPR ran a story about Temple Grandin a scientist who discovered a new method for turning cattle into flavorful steaks.

If the animals experience high stress levels, they release hormones which lower the meat quality. Grandin keeps the cattle calm. The key is to keep everything in their lives feeling and looking as normal and natural as possible. If you just keep the cows contented and comfortable, they'll go wherever they're led. The cattle continue down the ramp onto a smoothly curving path. There are no sudden turns. The cows experience the sensation of going home, the same kind of way they've traveled many times before. They're never aware enough to be alarmed by any of it. Grandin affectionately calls it "the stairway to heaven."⁵

The evil one wants to keep you focused on you: your comfort, your wants, your desires, what feels pleasurable to you, what everyone says is natural. Satan's most powerful trick is to separate you from God, to build a wall between you and the Lord and to put a mirror on your side of the wall. If he can tempt you to keep your eyes on yourself, he has no need to fear you. If the tempter can keep God out of your mind, God will be out of sight. So how do we have an unsinkable faith to face trials and temptations?

All Followers of Jesus Need a Timothy. In the midst of his separation anxiety from the Thessalonians, Paul sent his loyal assistant Timothy.

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 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. (I Thessalonians 3:1-3)

Occasionally I hear someone say, "I can be a Christian without the Church. I can have my own private relationship with God." Aside from being contrary to what the Bible says, my reply is: Why would you want that? Jesus gives us a caring community, a wonderful network of relationships to help us face every trial and temptation with unsinkable faith.

It's been this way from the very beginning. When Paul could not visit the Thessalonians he sent Timothy. When he arrived, Timothy strengthened and encouraged their faith. He literally put strength and courage into them. And when Timothy returned to Paul, he gave this report:

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

⁵ Russell D. Moore, *Tempted and Tried* (Crossway, 2011), pp. 25-26.

encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. (I Thessalonians 3:6-8)

As pastor, I wish I could be everywhere. I wish I could be with each one of you when you go through heartache, fear, sorrow and doubt. But I can't. And I don't have to because God created a wonderful network of Timothys to strengthen and encourage the faith of His people. As many of you know, Kim Engelsman, our Director of the Classic Service, is facing a serious surgery this week. I ask you to join me in praying for her complete healing and recovery. Even in this challenging time, I rejoiced to see how many Timothys came out to support her, help her, pray for her. I pray that will happen for every person in this community.

How can this happen? We need more Timothys. This week I had the pleasure of speaking with a man who is finding his way back to God. He was invited to come to Woodside by one of our high school students. Many churches suffer from the 80/20 rule: 80% of the work is done by 20% of the people. There are two things we can do to prevent this:

1. If you do anything at Woodside, please invite two people to be your Timothys. If you lead a Growth Group, youth ministry, a deacon, Sunday school, mission project, the sound board, play guitar, sing in the choir, open the door on Sunday morning – if you do anything, invite two people to do it *with* you. Show them how to do it by doing it. Then let them do it. And most importantly – ask each Timothy to find two Timothys.

2. If you are going through a trial or temptation, welcome the help of a Timothy. Let's not be stoic, stiff upper lip Christians. If you are struggling, doubting, hurting, ask for help and welcome help when it is offered. God designed us to depend on one another. Don't do it on your own. All of us have blind spots. We need others to help us see where God is leading. We need Timothys to come beside us and help us have out of sight faith.

Jake Olson is 16 years old, a resident of Huntington Beach, California and a 11th grade student. When Jake was 8 months old, he was diagnosed with a rare form of eye cancer, retinoblastoma. The disease claimed his left eye before he was a year old. In November 2009 Jake lost his right eye after battling the cancer for 12 years. Jake confronted many challenges during his battle. These trials could have caused him to despair and doubt. He could have been tempted to give up and wallow in self-pity. Instead, through the help of many Timothys in his life, Jake used his experience to better himself as a person and develop a strong faith in God.

Jake has many aspirations: to play the guitar, to become the first blind golfer on the PGA tour. Yet above all, Jake is a Timothy to countless children, teens and adults. Jake wrote a book when he was 8 years old to uplift and encourage children who are battling cancer and other diseases. He shares his story across the nation. He wants everyone to know that when trials and temptations come, you can face them with an unsinkable faith that is out of sight.