

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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## Abounding All The More

By Dan Trygg

“And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; <sup>13</sup> so that He may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.” 1 Thessalonians 3:12,13

“Finally then, brothers and sisters, we ask and encourage you in the Lord Jesus, that as you have received from us how you must walk and please God --according as you are walking-- in order that you might abound even more.” 1 Thessalonians 4:1

“About brotherly love: you don't need me to write you because you yourselves are taught-by-God to agapē-love one another. <sup>10</sup> In fact, you are doing this toward all the brothers and sisters in the entire region of Macedonia. But we encourage you, brothers and sisters, to abound even more.” 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10

The Thessalonian church must have really been something else. Paul was only able to be among them for about a month, but the impact was quite clear. **They received the message of the gospel with full hearts and complete conviction, accepting it as the Word of God** (1 Thess. 2:13). As a result of their open-hearted response, the teachings of Paul took hold of their hearts and operated within them.

**Paul had come to them, having recently left Philippi, where he had been mistreated and persecuted for his preaching** (Acts 16:16-17:1). After initial success at Thessalonica, among the Jews and God-fearers at the synagogue, some of the Jews became jealous, and stirred up a mob against them. They descended upon the house of Jason, where Paul had been staying, in an attempt to seize Paul, but he was not there. So they grabbed Jason, and some of the other believers, and brought them before the city authorities, ...claiming that Paul was preaching treason, and that Jason was harboring him. After obtaining a security bond from Jason, they released them upon the condition that Paul leave town (Acts 17:1-9). So, not only did Paul experience, once again, the sting of persecution, but **these new believers at Thessalonica received their own “baptism by fire” into the conflict and suffering which accompanied the commitment of following Jesus**. Paul had already prepared them for this possibility, having told them in advance that “we were going to suffer afflictions” (1 Thess. 3:4). So, **when these events transpired, these new believers would not be cowed. Instead, they responded as did Paul, with joy in the Lord and with overcoming perseverance in their faith and obedience**. Paul could later say that they became not only imitators of him, but also of the churches in Judea, who also shared in the same sort of afflictions and persecution (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14). Thus, **they themselves also became an encouragement and example to other churches** in Macedonia and Achaia, because the message of the gospel, and the report of their own faith story, was sounded abroad throughout the entire region (1:7,8).

At first, Paul was concerned about whether they would persist, or cave in to the opposition, ...but **having received a report from Timothy that they were standing strong, he wrote to encourage them to go deeper in their walk with Christ** (1 Thess. 3:1-4:12). Interestingly, in that short span of verses, **he chose to use the word “abound” three different times** (3:12; 4:1,10). I think this is significant, and it is worth our consideration to examine what he says to them, because it was meant to serve them as an encouragement for their spiritual development, moving forward.

**In 3:12, the language is very expansive and almost extreme in the picture it paints**. It is a prayer, so it is written in a form that expresses Paul's wish or desire for them: **“May the Lord multiply/greatly-increase/super-abound and richly-provide/cause-to-increase-and-overflow/surpass-beyond-limit y'all in the agapē-love** unto one another and unto all according-as also we toward you.” **The words Paul chose here are vivid, powerful and intentionally dramatic. They paint a picture of an abundant, out-flowing, limitless, more-than-enough flow of agapē-love. BUT, the thought does not end there!** It would be so easy to end the sentence in our minds where the verse ends, and miss a very powerful insight: the *purpose* of this abundant, out-flowing, limitless fountain of love. “...to the end that your hearts may be strengthened without-fault-or-defect in holiness/dedication before our God...” **The purpose of this abounding, overflowing, limitless flow of love is to strengthen and establish our hearts in holiness before God.**

**A couple of observations would be in order, here:**

**First, this is a prayer.** Paul *expects* that God could do this, ...and *is asking Him* to do this. This is consistent with his prayers in other places. For example in Ephesians 3:14-21, Paul prays that God might grant to the believers in Ephesus that they might be strengthened through His Spirit in the inner man, ...that Christ might habitually-dwell in their hearts through faith..., and having-been-rooted and grounded in *agapē-love* in order that (for the purpose that) they might become strong enough to grasp (seize/hold-down) ...to experientially-know the unfathomable *agapē-love* of Christ *in order that they might be filled-full unto all the full-measure/overflowing-abundance of God.*

The experience of *agapē*-love will bring about an expansive, limitless filling of the Spirit. This is Paul's vision here in 1 Thessalonians, as well. And in both passages, Paul expresses this vision as a prayer.

**Second, the flow of *agapē*-love will bring about a deepening of holiness, dedication and fullness of the Spirit.** Paul seems to see this flow of *agapē*-love as the power to bring about change and transformation.

**In 4:1, Paul asks and encourages them in order that according-as they had received from Paul and his co-workers how, or in what manner, it is necessary for them to walk-about and to please God, that they would walk-about, in order that they might abound/overflow all the more. Now, there are two ways to perceive this verse: behaviorally or operationally.** We can look at this verse as *Paul's reminder of the behavior he prescribed for them to try to keep*, and as an admonition to "excel" (a common translation choice, but *not* really consistent with the main thrust of the word) still more. Or, we could look at this as *Paul's reminder to live by the inner principle he taught them*. He taught them *how, or in what manner, by what technique or approach*, it would be necessary to live and to please God, ...in order that they might *experience* the abundant flow. **The behavioral interpretation sees this as Paul telling them to focus on their behavior all the more, ...the operational interpretation sees this as Paul encouraging them to go to the Source in order that they might experience the abundant flow all the more.** The behavioral approach is basically *trying to live by the law*; the operational approach is *focused on living by the Spirit*.

**A couple of observations would be in order, here:**

**First, the use of the word "abound" or "overflow" was last used only two verses before, and there the focus was definitely about experiencing the abundant flow of love from within, and that would change the behavior.** To interpret 4:1 from a behavioral perspective seems to be a very foreign thought to what Paul was teaching in the two verses before.

**Second, which approach seems more consistent with Paul's teachings throughout his NT writings?** Clearly, Paul was all about walking in the Spirit, ...being filled with the Spirit, ...being led by the Spirit. He often had to contend *against* those who advocated a behavioral approach. He said some very strong things in this regard. He said that those who tried to live by the law cut themselves off from Christ, ...Christ would be of no practical benefit to them (Gal. 5:1-4). Why would he switch sides, here? Paul was all about being changed from the inside-out, ...not from the outside-in (e.g., Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:6,17,18).

**In 4:9,10, after saying that they are God-taught to *agapē*-love one another, and that they are doing this, he encourages them to "abound more".** Paul seems to have a penchant for this word, "abound" or "overflow". This is the third time in twelve verses he has chosen to use this word.

**A couple of observations would be in order, here:**

**First, this latter phrase is comprised of exactly the same words that are at the end of 4:1.** The first word in this two-word phrase is the one meaning "to have more than enough, to overflow, to increase beyond limit, to abound" followed by the word which means "more, all the more, or to a greater degree, or to a greater extent". **You can see the extreme, emphatic word picture of putting these words together in the same phrase really conveys. And, by using the exact same words to end this sentence, that he used only eight verses earlier, it is clear that Paul is building upon what he said there,** or at least drawing a connection to what was said there.

**Second, 4:9,10 seems to be an application of the general principle stated in 4:1.** In 4:1, Paul had stated a general operating principle, about how they are to live. It would seem that **4:9,10 is an application of that general operational principle to this particular area of *agapē*-love, ...namely that *agapē*-love, like the Christian life in general, is to be the outflow of that inner spring of life that comes from the Holy Spirit inside of us.**

**Third, Paul found it necessary to create a term to convey the inner dynamic of the Holy Spirit. Here, the allusion to the inner life is conveyed by the word "God-taught".** This word was coined by Paul, and was later used only by ecclesiastical writers. **This was a concept foreign to the secular writers of the time. God-taught? God-taught to *agapē*-love? How strange that would have sounded to the ears of those outside of the Body of Christ.** Then, the admonition to "abundantly-overflow all the more"? What is *that*? What is this babbler talking about? Sadly, I think most Christians are not walking in this dynamic, either, ...so we have trouble faithfully translating and expressing the original language.

**Fourth, Paul has brought us full circle in his thoughts to application of his prayer in 3:12.** If we go back only a couple of more verses, to 3:12, we see that we return to where Paul began to talk about this love abounding from the inside-out. The subject matter there was asking GOD to abundantly-increase and overflowingly-increase *agapē*-love. Now, Paul is saying we are "God-taught to *agapē*-love." Can we possibly miss the fact that he is talking about the same thing? **Paul is encouraging us to overflow-in-action with the overflowing-of-God's-working-within us.**

Go to the *limitless* Source for the *abounding* love, and express that *overflow* in practical action even *more!*