



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

**Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent**

December 1, 2024

# Assurance of Strength

## 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13

<sup>9</sup>What thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, <sup>10</sup>as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

<sup>11</sup>Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, <sup>12</sup>and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, <sup>13</sup>so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

The great gothic cathedrals from the Middle Ages cannot stand up under their own weight. Their towering, arched roofs create such a heavy load on their comparatively thin walls that everything wants to buckle outward and collapse. But the walls don't collapse. Even though the immense weight is too great for them to bear on their own, the walls of these old cathedrals stand firmly supported by flying buttresses, which provide them with all the reinforcement and strength they need to bear up under their load.

A flying buttress is a sort of half-arch that stands outside the building. It's supported by its own pillar, and it connects at the wall of the building right where the wall wants to break. In that position, it absorbs the weight of the roof, drawing that weight off the wall and onto itself. The flying buttress provides strength for the wall by sharing the wall's load and by reinforcing the wall at its weakest point.

In today's Epistle, St. Paul prays that the Lord may "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 saints" (1 Ths. 3:13). The word he uses here for "strengthen" – or "establish" as it appears in the English Standard Version – carries with it a lot of "flying buttress" imagery. It's the same word the ancient Greeks used for putting a buttress on a building or for reinforcing a wall. Essentially, then, this is the prayer that Paul prays for the Thessalonians and for you: That your Lord would buttress and reinforce the walls of your heart, so that you may bear up under the load of your existence and finally appear before Him tall and firm – "blameless and holy" – without any danger of buckling or collapsing.

The Thessalonians were in great need of divine buttressing. They had fallen victim to false teachers who had whipped them into a terror about the coming of Christ, and their hearts were quaking with fear. They were wrongly convinced that faith and trust in Jesus



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were not enough to prepare them for His coming, and they trembled at the thought that He would return before they were ready.

The reality is that there's not much that *can* be done with the heart itself, whether we're talking about Thessalonian hearts or our own. The heart remains a cesspool until the day we die. It doubts, it fears, it hates, it wanders, and it sires all sorts of words and actions that ought never be born. Its thin, sin-riddled walls are nowhere near stout enough to bear the weight of its own existence, just like the gothic cathedrals. Left on its own, it would surely collapse, and among those without Christ it often does.

So Paul prays that God would strengthen, buttress, reinforce the Thessalonians' weak and fearful hearts in anticipation of the Lord's return. When he prays, "May He strengthen your hearts," he's really praying that God would increase and strengthen *faith*, for faith in Jesus is the one and only thing that will calm your fear of the Last Day.

When God strengthens hearts and increases faith, He does so in a way similar to the way Medieval architects used flying buttresses to reinforce the walls of their cathedrals. Your heavenly Father knows that if your faith were left to itself, it would quickly crumble under the weight of your existence, just as the cathedral walls would quickly crumble under the weight of their rooftops. So God strengthens your faith with the flying buttresses of His heavenly gifts. He hems in your faith with His divine and all-powerful Word, "which is at work in you who believe" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). He daily renews the sin-washing work of your baptism, which makes you "blameless and holy in the presence of God." He feeds you with His Son's own body and blood, given for you, so that by this gift "your love increases and overflows for each other and for everyone else" (1 Thessalonians 3:12).

With these great gifts, your loving Father assures you that He will provide you with everything you need for your Lord's return. If you feel fearful, run quickly to the strengthening assurance of His Word, in which He promises not to condemn you, but that "your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28). If you feel unprepared because of your persistent struggle with temptation and sin, make the sign of the holy cross and say, "In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen," for if you resist the devil in this way he will flee from you. If you fear that you will not have the strength to survive all of the terrors that will befall the earth as the Last Day approaches, then come quickly to Holy Communion and receive the Lord's strength, which far surpasses your own. Don't focus on the weak and tottering walls of your heart, but look to those great buttressing gifts that God has given you, for they surround you and fortify you and bear your load. Because of these gifts, Paul's prayer – for you as for the Thessalonians – shall undoubtedly be answered: Your Savior will indeed "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 saints" (1 Thessalonians 3:13). In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen