

PRAYING

2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

As we can well appreciate, the major teaching section of Paul's second letter to the church in Thessalonica is difficult to understand for two reasons. First, it is Paul's reply to problems that had arisen in the church due to misunderstandings of his teaching, and, second, the language which he uses is cryptic since we do not know what he said orally to the church. Such difficulty in understanding what the Bible says is an ongoing problem and this problem is exacerbated when we neglect to consider the context of the text. We add to the confusion when we take metaphors and euphemisms and interpret them as literal and when we take what we believe is "implied" in the Bible and give it the same credibility as an actual quotation from Scripture.

In the first part of chapter two, Paul addressed the question of who, what, when and why God would be dealing with those who had abandoned the truth and were actively persecuting those believers whom God was bringing together to be His ambassadors in the world. Paul described these apostates in some rather harsh terms and even said they were imitating Satan; i.e., they had power and position and constantly lied. God's judgment would come upon those who were rebelling against Him and His will for humanity.

In sharp contrast to those who had been and were still departing from God, Paul shifted his remarks back to the believers at Thessalonica who were faithfully following God to encourage them to continue to grow in the Lord. Paul's teaching in this chapter was meant to tell them that the "end" was not as near as they thought and to encourage them to stand fast regardless of what might happen. A similar message to Christians today is that we should not be overly concerned about identifying 'signs of the end' times. However, we do need to be alert to moral and spiritual issues which might tempt us to abandon faith in the Lord and faithfulness to Him in times of persecution.

Be Steadfast – 2:13-15

¹³ But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. ¹⁴ To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. 2 Thessalonians 2:13–15 (ESV)

These are words of strong encouragement. They needed encouragement because of the evil in the world that was opposing the redeeming and restorative work of God in which "a return of the nations to God" was actively underway. There were and still are "anti-Christian" forces that are in positions of power that want to move the world toward chaos and destruction. Those who are faithfully loyal to the Lord will experience persecution and resistance. The Christians at Thessalonica were in the middle of such persecution and during the past two thousand years, true believers have been experiencing opposition and hate from those in positions of power who had hidden agendas that were not aligned with the truth of God's word. Similar forces are at work today that would move the world away from Godliness and from those who worship God. However, we must never give up and lose hope. We are enabled to walk in the Way and just as Paul reminded those in Thessalonica, we need to remember why we are different from those who reject God.

While there is an implied warning of the danger that might come from persecutors and the danger of drifting into unbelief because of trials and tribulations, Paul wanted to encourage them by reminding them of what God had already done for them. Specifically, we understand that God was still at work in them and that a glorious future was ahead of them. That truth has not changed and it certainly applies to us.

In these verses we see a concise summary of the gospel regarding God's plan of

salvation. Paul referred to them as “brothers beloved of the Lord” which should remind us of John 3:16 – “For God so-loved the world that He gave His uniquely begotten Son that whoever trusts in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” The fact that God chose them should remind us that God is the initiator of salvation and it is His plan from the beginning to save those who believe. Our part in the process is to believe the truth which results in our justification or being deemed as righteous before God. However, as Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, even the faith to believe is given to us by God which Paul confirmed when he wrote “For it is by grace through faith (and that not of ourselves) that He saves us.” Next, we see that are saved “through sanctification by the Spirit” which follows our justification and by which we are transformed into the image of God’s Son. The final outcome (glorification) was mentioned by Paul in verse 14 as “obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In John 6:44 we learn that no one comes to Christ for salvation unless the Father draws (leads or impels) him or her. In verse 14 of our current study, we see that it is the gospel message by which God calls (draws) us. The gospel message went out to the Jews first and most of them rejected the call. This rebellious behavior (apostasy) was predicted by Jesus in the parable of the wedding feast. In the same way that the subjects of the king refused to come to the wedding feast for the son of the king, the Jews turned away from God. This “turning away” from the king incurred his wrath and the invitation or call went out to others in the “highways and byways” and many accepted the invitation. The Christians at Thessalonica (these were made of both Jews and Gentile believers) were part of that group of those who responded positively to the call. Many others were called (heard the gospel) but few opted to choose God’s provision for salvation.

When we realize that (as believers) we are not alone in this process and we are part of the overall Plan of God, then we understand the importance of standing firm in our faith (trust) and our commitment to hold on to the truth and not be misled by false doctrines that do not agree with God’s word (obey).

Be Encouraged – 2:16-17

¹⁶ Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17 (ESV)

Paul had summarized his previous oral teaching on the “day of the Lord” in an effort to provide assurance that God was still in charge and that He was going to deal with those “lawless ones” who opposed His plan of salvation. He then offered a prayer for these new believers who were experiencing the results of the anti-God opposition. We can read into this prayer that Paul told them that God (who was able to save them and bring them out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light) could certainly deal with the ongoing problems they were experiencing. Knowing that God is omnipotent and is totally aware of what was happening to them should provide great comfort and assurance to them since they had confidence that He loved them.

When we encounter problems in life there are several paths that we might take. One is to simply give up or abandon whatever might be the root of the problems we are having. Another option is to do nothing but just live (or die) with the problems. A third possibility is to double down and try harder. The first two choices are not really good options, so that leaves us with trying harder. When we go with option three, we will usually turn to and rely on what we trust in most.

My initial thought of “what” people trust in most was “themselves.” However, that response may be somewhat passe in today’s world. Based on what we hear discussed in much of the news media, many look to the “government” for solutions to problems. As we have repeatedly seen, such trust is grossly misplaced. Trust in or relying on our wits or our own

resources in many cases is not much better. In What or in Whom should we be trusting? We trusted Jesus to save us at the very beginning, therefore, we should also trust Him now. Why?

1. His love for us has not changed.
2. His grace is still there.
3. He supplies eternal encouragement and hope that are found in our fellowship with God and in His word.
4. Our obedience (every good deed and word) is not a matter of our doing so in our own strength but in His strength.

Be Prayerful – 3:1-2

¹ Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, ² and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2 (ESV)

After addressing the concerns these believers had regarding the “day of the Lord” and encouraging them with assurance that God is still in charge, Paul moved to some general instructions regarding the ministry, mission, and methods of what should be reasonably expected for the ongoing operation of the church in Thessalonica. One of the main expectations of a local body of believers is support for the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

A significant support effort that has not had a lot of emphasis lately in many churches is to pray for those who are actively involved in missionary work in areas where the impact of the gospel may be absent or just beginning. This was certainly the situation in which Paul, Silas, and Timothy were facing as they left Thessalonica and moved to other parts of southern Europe to confirm the message of the gospel and establish churches in those areas.

We see a sense of urgency in the words of Paul that the message “may speed ahead.” For most church members, the sense of “urgency” is missing and it also seems that we are lacking a sense of “importance” in this area. Funding for mission support in many churches is a very minor part of where their financial resources are directed.

Another significant concern that Paul saw as important was that the gospel message (the word of the Lord) “be honored” or received with a realization that “this information is important and I should pay attention.” Such ‘honoring of the word’ had happened in Thessalonica by some of the people which resulted in them coming into a saving relationship with the Lord.

What are some factors that influence whether the “word of the Lord” is honored when it is introduced into any situation? Two general possibilities come to mind. One of these relates to those who hear the word and the other to those who speak the word. If those who hear the word have a sense of incompleteness in their lives (humility), then they will be open to a message of improving life. Those who are self-satisfied (prideful) will not listen.

The factor that is related to the deliverer of the message is whether there is any evidence that the “word of the Lord” makes a difference in the lives of those who embrace it. During the time when Paul was taking the gospel into all the world, the preaching of the word was accompanied by such things as people being healed and demons being cast out of people. There were other miraculous things that happened such as jail doors being opened by earthquakes. What evidence do we have that can be effective in our world today? People are still being healed, lives are still being changed, some people practice forgiveness when they are wronged, and some go the second mile and turn the other cheek. There has to be evidence in our individual lives that trusting in God for our salvation has made a real difference before others will give any credibility to the message we share with them.

While we are focusing on the expansion of the Kingdom of God, we still have to keep a constant awareness that the enemies of the Lord are at work to oppose what “good things” God is doing. That opposition can find expression in persecution and intimidation of those God is using to spread the good news. Paul was well aware of this opposition and asked for the believers in Thessalonica to pray that he would be delivered from those who refused to believe the gospel.

Though we are being attacked, criticized, abused or whatever, we must not forget why

God saved us. There is work to be done. We have been commissioned to take the Gospel to others. We cannot forget the rest of mankind who has not experienced the salvation we have. Paul prayed for and encouraged them, he wanted them to do the same for him. We must support each other.

Be Confident – 3:3-5

³ But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. ⁴ And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. ⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. 2 Thessalonians 3:3-5 (ESV)

Though we help and encourage others and we need such help and encouragement ourselves, when that is not forthcoming, we must realize that our ultimate confidence and trust are in the Lord. (The help we give to others comes from the Lord and not from us. The same applies to the help others give us.)

The aspects of our walk with the Lord that should be evident in our lives are condensed and summarized in Paul's prayer for these believers. The key to having these aspects being expressed in "who we are and what we do" is found in the final thoughts of Paul's prayer in verse five. It starts in the spiritual realm and manifests itself in the physical realm of our lives. This verse essentially has the same message that Jesus stated to His disciples in John 14:23 where we read "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching." Paul's prayer for believers is exactly this same concept that as we love God, then the faithfulness and patience that were evident in the life of Christ will find expression in our lives.

Alexander MacLaren summed it up this way: "The Apostle gathers up the whole sum of his desires for his friends, and presents to us the whole aim of our efforts for ourselves, in these two things, a steadfast love to God, and a calm endurance of evil and persistence in duty, unaffected by suffering or by pain. If we have these two, we shall not be far from being what God wishes to see (in) us."

All of us are familiar with these verses regarding the importance of what motivates us to be connected to our love of the Lord in all that we do. However, we also recognize that we are not always making that connection in the daily routineness of living. This is likely to be a common problem with Christians and may be what Paul was thinking about as he included a request for help from the Lord "to guide our hearts." This request is reminiscent of the prayer of Solomon for God's people during the dedication of the Temple when he prayed (1 Kings 8:58) "that He may incline our hearts to Himself, to walk in all His ways, and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, which He commanded our fathers." As we mature in our spiritual walk, we become more and more aware that the Lord (by His Spirit) is providing such guidance even in the small and seemingly insignificant things we think, say, and do. It also helps if we realize that such guidance is what Jesus promised when He said (regarding the Holy Spirit) "He shall guide you into all truth."