

## 2 Thessalonians 3:1-18

### Introduction

When Paul wrote his first letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, he was full of thankfulness to God for them. The gospel had come to them not simply with words but also with power. They had welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so, he said, they had become a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. And as we've seen, not much has changed. Twice in this letter, his second letter, he has expressed his thankfulness to God for them. He boasts about their perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials they're enduring. He's thankful that God has chosen them to be saved.

But they're not perfect. If they were getting an end of term school report, it wouldn't be an A but an A minus. There's no such thing as a perfect church. And so, Paul ends with a final command about some wrong behaviour. But before getting to that, he begins with some encouragement. He asks them to pray for the progress of the gospel. He is delighted that the gospel has come to the Thessalonians with power. But he wants it to keep making progress everywhere.

And that's our first heading: Pray for the progress of the gospel.

### Pray for the progress of the gospel

Please look down again at verses 1 and 2. He writes this: **As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith.**

Paul is fully aware that the success of his witness depends not on himself but on God. It's true of all of us. The success of our witness to our friends and families does not ultimately depend on us but on God. That's why Paul asks for prayer. His deep sense of dependence on God drives him to God in prayer. And if we share that sense of dependence on God, then the first thing we will do when we consider our own witness at work, or in the home, or wherever it may be, is to bow our heads in prayer to God. Our evangelism as a church must be rooted in prayer. That's one reason that our monthly prayer meetings are so important.

Paul's evangelism is rooted in prayer. And in this letter, he makes two prayer requests. Firstly, he wants prayer for the gospel message to spread rapidly and be honoured. Think of a video clip going viral on social media. That's what Paul wants the gospel to do. To spread rapidly. To go viral. To get more and more clicks. More literally, he wants it to run. Think of a dog sprinting away from its owner to chase after a ball. He wants the gospel message to sprout legs and run. But he doesn't want it merely to spread and be heard. He longs for it to be honoured. In other words, he longs for it to be received appropriately by those who

hear it, just as the Thessalonians had done. In his first letter, he described how their response to the gospel had become known everywhere. People were talking about how they had turned from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven. And that's what Paul wants to see everywhere. It's what we should be praying for too, particularly this Christmas, as we share the good news of Jesus. We need to be praying that people won't just hear the good news of Jesus, but that they'll receive the good news with faith and have their lives transformed. That might seem like a *big* prayer. But we need to pray big prayers. I need to be praying for that every day. We all do.

But Paul is realistic about the opposition he'll face, so his second prayer request is for protection: **And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith.**

He doesn't pray that he *won't face* opposition as he preaches the message of Jesus. Rather, that he'll be delivered *from it* so that he can *carry on* preaching the message of Jesus. He doesn't want opposition to stop him. As the opposition we experience here in the UK gradually increases, it's a prayer that you and I also need to pray. We need to pray for protection. Not so that our lives don't become uncomfortable. But so that we can stick at the job Jesus has given us of making him known.

So, Paul's prayer request is for the spread and success of the gospel and protection from the inevitable opposition that will come. But with that thought, he quickly passes from his need to theirs.

Please look again at verse 3. He writes: **But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.**

Despite all the troubles the Christians in Thessalonica are going through – the persecution they're suffering at the hands of their opponents and the deception of false teachers – Paul's confident that God will not abandon them. God is faithful. He will guard them continually against the assaults of the evil one. In one of *his* letters, the apostle Peter warns his readers to be alert and sober minded. He says: **Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.** (1 Peter 5:8) This is what we need to realise. Every day of our lives, we are in a spiritual battle. The devil is determined to destroy us. He's intent on drawing us away from Christ and into sin. To put it in terms of modern warfare, every day he's sending drones against us and wave after wave of rocket attacks. He's laying land mines in our paths. And we need to be alert to his schemes. But we don't need to fear because God is with us. He is faithful. He has promised elsewhere that he will neither leave us nor forsake us. There may be powerful forces against us, but the Lord is greater than them all. And he will guard us continually.

Paul is confident of that. And he's also confident that the Christians in Thessalonica will continue to do the things he had commanded. In other words, he's confident that the gospel will continue to make progress in their lives too as they obey the apostles' teaching. The longer we follow Jesus, the more we can look back and see change in particular areas of our lives. A temptation we used to struggle with has lost its power. A sin that used to trip us up, is no longer such a problem. That's not because we're such wonderful people. It's the Lord's work in us. His word, passed on to us through his apostles, has seeped into our hearts and the Lord has been at work to change us.

And as the gospel changes the lives of the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul prays that they will have even greater experience of God's love and Christ's perseverance.

God has loved them from the beginning. And Paul prays that his love would become more and more real to them. And likewise, Christ's perseverance. Christ persevered through suffering and opposition all the way to glory. What he endured is far greater than anything we will ever be called to endure. And Paul prays that they will know his strengthening more and more until the day he returns, and we share his glory forever.

That's how we should be praying for each other. I would love you to be praying in that way for *me*. And we can *all* make this our prayer for one another.

Paul wants us to be praying for the progress of the gospel in the lives of non-believers, and in our own lives too. And that's why he wants the church in Thessalonica to take responsibility for warning those who are disorderly. Here's the problem he needs to address. And it's our second heading: Warn the disorderly.

### Warn the disorderly

Please look down at verse 6.

**In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.**

And look at verse 11.

**We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.**

Paul wants the gospel to be making progress in the lives of the believers in Thessalonica and shaping how they live. He had taught them to work hard so that the name of Jesus might be glorified. He had given them a rule: **'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.'** In his previous letter, he had urged them to work with their hands, so that their lives might win

the respect of outsiders. He didn't want them to be dependent on anybody. But that call had apparently gone unheeded.

Some are being 'idle and disruptive', he says. In the original language, the word means 'disorderly'. It's a word that could be used of an unruly soldier who failed to stay in line. Some members of the church in the Thessalonica were unruly and disorderly. They're not busy, they're busybodies, he says. They're not busy with good deeds. They're just busy stirring up trouble and causing problems.

It's not that these people are unbelievers. In verse 6, Paul calls them believers. In verse 14 he says: **Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer.**

The issue is that these believers are not behaving as they should. They're happy to be dependent on others. They're happy to take from others rather than providing for themselves. They're happy to receive without contributing. They don't seem to care that they're causing problems in the church. So, Paul commands the other believers to keep away from them. Not to associate with them. That may sound harsh. But keeping away from such people would mean withdrawing the support they were so dependent on. And Paul's hope is that they may feel ashamed. In other words, he hopes that it might lead to repentance and change. It might help them to see how much they're taking others for granted. And he hopes for a change of heart and a change in behaviour.

Paul's underlying concern here is for believers to live their lives in line with the gospel message they have received. That's why he reminds them of the example he set them, in verses 7 to 10. When he and his companions had been with them, they had waived their right to be maintained at the expense of others and had worked hard. They hadn't been a burden to anyone. Paul's life had been a model of sacrificial service and love, which had backed up the message he preached. He had given himself sacrificially for the sake of others, just like the Saviour he proclaimed. And he tells us why he did that in verse 9.

**We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate.**

Of course, there are times when we need to be dependent on others for good reason. Perhaps in times of illness. Or old age. Or circumstances beyond our control. At those times it is good and right to let others help you. But the normal pattern of the Christian life is to give ourselves for the sake of others. Our lives are to show self-sacrificial service and love, which commends the message we preach. And that's why Paul takes this matter so seriously. If the gospel message is to spread rapidly and be honoured among *non*-believers, then *believers* need to live lives that model it and commend it. We're never to tire of doing good, he says.

To be lazy and act selfishly undermines the gospel message. Rather than winning the respect of outsiders, it *loses* their respect. Rather than strengthening the church, it causes tension and division.

For you and me, the issue may or may not be laziness. It might be something else. As I read this, I need to ask myself: Is there an aspect of my behaviour that contradicts the message I proclaim: the message of a Saviour, who sacrificially gave himself for others? Is there an area in which I'm happy to receive without contributing? Is there an aspect of my behaviour that causes tension with others, perhaps because of my selfishness? Am I acting in a way that dishonours the Lord? If so, then I need to change. I need to repent and amend my behaviour. It's a question we should all ask ourselves, so that the gospel message we proclaim might not be tarnished. Our lives are to commend and adorn the gospel, not undermine it.

So finally, having addressed an issue that was causing tension, Paul prays for peace in the church at Thessalonica. That's our final heading: Pursue peace.

### Pursue peace

Very briefly, let's look at verses 16 to 18. They say this:

**Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.**

**I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.**

Even as squabbles are being sorted out, and the wayward lives of some of the members being addressed, Paul prays for peace and unity. Although church members may sometimes need to be challenged or rebuked, we are still brothers and sisters in one family. And we mustn't lose sight of that fact. Though tensions may arise between us, we are not enemies but brothers and sisters in Christ. So, Paul prays for God's peace. He prays that the Lord of peace may give them **peace at all times and in every way**. In other words, he prays for them to enjoy peace constantly. And he prays for them to enjoy peace in all circumstances. And notice how inclusive his prayer is. He prays that the Lord would be with all of them, which includes those who are unruly and disorderly.

Then he signs off. Paul's practice seems to have been to dictate his letters for someone to write down and then to add a few words in his own handwriting near the end. And that's what he does here. And then he commits them all to the Lord's grace to end.

### Conclusion

We mustn't forget that Paul has got his eyes fixed on the Lord's return. He wants them, and us, to be living our lives for the glory of Jesus until that day comes. He's been telling us how to do that. But more importantly, he's been assuring us that God is with us. He will neither leave us nor forsake us. He has given us eternal encouragement and good hope. He will protect us from the evil one. He will bring to fruition every desire for goodness and every good deed prompted by faith. And he will remain with us always until *that* day, when we are gathered to his Son and share his glory forever. What more encouragement could we need as we live our lives for him?

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for your constant presence with us as we wait for the return of Jesus. Thank you for the strength and encouragement you give. Thank you for your protection against the schemes of the evil one. Thank you for your peace in times of trouble. And thank you for the good hope you have placed in our hearts and the promise of glory ahead. Please help us to live for your glory every day. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.