



2 Thessalonians - Chapter Three

Summary of Chapter Three

At the end of the previous chapter, Paul had prayed earnestly for the Thessalonians, and now he desires their prayers, encouraging them to trust in God, to which he subjoins another petition for them (vv.1-5). He then proceeds to give them commands and directions for correcting some things he was informed were amiss among them (vv.6-15), and concludes with benedictions and prayers (vv.16-18).

IV. 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5 - Request for Prayer

Paul requests prayer for his work, reassures the Thessalonians regarding God's faithfulness, and closes by praying for them.

¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you, ² and that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people; for not all have faith.

2 Thessalonians 3:1-2

Pray for us. Paul requests prayer for the Gospel's advance through his ministry and for deliverance from wicked opponents. He wants them to pray that the word of the Lord, i.e. the Gospel, would spread rapidly ahead, that is, enjoy unhindered progress around the world, thus it would be glorified everywhere, honoured by people acknowledging its truth and embracing God's gracious offer of salvation.

Paul knew that it was prayer that would break the restricting forces that seems to hinder the advance of the Gospel. It must have seemed strange to the Thessalonians, as new Christians, that Paul, the great apostle through whom God was doing so many remarkable things, should need their prayers so that his work should prosper. But the God who inspires prayer by his Spirit, and attends to it in his love, is no respecter of persons. He hears the prayers of those whom the world may know nothing about and answers them in just the same way as he does those of great evangelists and preachers.

That we may be rescued from wicked and evil people. Paul would later request a similar prayer from the Roman church: *<<I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judæa, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints>>* (Romans 15:30-31). Paul never let his exultation of God's love and power to blind him to the truth of the opposition that he faced in his work. When God's light shines into places where darkness has allowed evil to flourish undetected it makes people nervous, then angry and then malicious. Not everyone believes the Gospel when it is proclaimed. Those who hear it but do not believe it may well resort to plotting and even violence against those bringing the message. It happened to Paul frequently and he, like his successors today, needs the prayers of the church in order to receive God's defence of their ministry when faced with such opposition.

For not all have faith. The Gospel is not always embraced with faith; indeed, it frequently provokes violent hostility.

³ But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. ⁴ And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will go on doing the things that we command.

2 Thessalonians 3:3-4

Paul gives some final words of comfort to the Thessalonians in the wake of the false claim about Christ's return (2:2). In Greek, the last word of v.2 is faith, Greek *pistis*, and the first word of v.3 is faithful, Greek *pistos*, indicating that the unbelievers' lack of faith contrasts with God's faithfulness.

Guard you from the evil one. This refers to Satan: *<<Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one>>* (Matthew 5:37), who has been seeking to destroy the Thessalonians' young faith. But God's faithfulness assures Paul that the Evil One will not succeed: the Thessalonians will overcome him by responding appropriately to Paul's two letters. He has confidence that they already are doing and, when they get this letter, will go on doing the things that Paul commands. This is similar to what Paul would later write to Corinth: *<<And I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice; for I am confident about all of you, that my joy would be the joy of all of you>>* (2 Corinthians 2:3). Paul may have in mind his instruction to discipline those within their community who are idle (vv.6-15), and/or his command to hold to the traditions about the Day of the Lord (2:15).

Here again is the paradox of Christian living. It is because the Lord is faithful and guards those who believe in him that the church prays that he will do so!

⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

2 Thessalonians 3:5

Paul prays that the Thessalonians will be directed toward the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ, by which he means either Christ's endurance as a model for Christians or the perseverance imparted by Christ. Go on directing your hearts, Paul tells them, and as they meditate on his patience, and his strength under suffering, some of that patience will rub off on them, helping them to persevere in their new found faith, which offers them so much. Paul's words echo those of King David: <<*O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our ancestors, keep for ever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts towards you*>> (1 Chronicles 29:18).

V. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 - Warning against Idleness

Paul instructs the Thessalonian community to exercise church discipline on those refusing to work. Although there is nothing in 1 or 2 Thessalonians that explicitly links the idleness with the confusion about the end times, many think that the Thessalonians stopped working to await and proclaim the Lord's coming. Others believe that the problem was merely one of lazy Christians exploiting the charity of wealthier Christians, and using their free time to meddle in others' affairs. Whatever the cause of the idleness, Paul's patience has evidently now run out, especially since his exhortation given in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12.

⁶ Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us.

2 Thessalonians 3:6

Paul strongly commands, Greek *parangellō*, the community as a whole to discipline by disassociation those who are not working but are depending on others for a living. The community is to keep away from these idlers in the church, which probably means excommunicating them, as it did for the person in Corinth who was guilty of gross sexual immorality: <<*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you? For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgement in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord*>> (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). Paul takes the sin of these people seriously, but at this point he still regards them as 'believers' (v.15).

In idleness, Greek *ataktōs*, means 'in an undisciplined, irresponsible or disorderly manner'. These people are shirking their obligation to work, contrary to the original intention of God: <<*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it*>> (Genesis 2:15). This behaviour was not

according to the tradition passed on by the missionaries regarding the necessity of working for one's keep.

Introduction to 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10

The missionaries had passed on the tradition about the need to work for a living both by example (vv.7-9) and through oral instruction (v.10).

⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. ⁹ This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate.

2 Thessalonians 3:7-9

You ought to imitate us. Part of Christian growth is to emulate those who are spiritually mature and genuinely seeking to follow the Lord's example. Paul held himself up as one who set a good example for others: <<*I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me*>> (1 Corinthians 4:16), <<*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*>> (1 Corinthians 11:1), and: <<*Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us*>> (Philippians 3:17). Ultimately, they are called to copy their heavenly Father: <<*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children*>> (Ephesians 5:1).

We were not idle when we were with you. In between the bookends concerning those who are idle in v.6 and v.11, Paul points out the example that he and his team gave them to follow.

We did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it. Paul refused to depend on others for his living. Indeed he took on a heavy workload of manual labour in addition to his ministry commitments in order to avoid being a financial burden to any Thessalonian Christian, even though, in contrast to the idle Thessalonians, it was his God-given right to be supported. Refer to 1 Corinthians 9:3-15, 2 Corinthians 11:7-9, 1 Thessalonians 2:9, and the associated comments. He wanted to provide his converts with an example to imitate.

¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.

2 Thessalonians 3:10

Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. This would include both the common distribution of food to the needy and the sharing of common meals. The key to this phrase is willingness. Paul fully supported the concept of looking after those in the community who are not able to look after themselves for genuine reasons. To do so was part of Paul's Jewish heritage: <<*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow*>> (Isaiah 1:16-17), and was accepted as part of the Christian mandate:

<<Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world>> (James 1:27).

¹¹ For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.

2 Thessalonians 3:11

For we hear that some of you are living in idleness. Paul clearly knew that some in the church were idle for he addressed it in part in his first letter: <<*And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them*>> (1 Thessalonians 5:14), and therefore had heard it from Timothy. However, things may have deteriorated further which had come to Paul's attention in a further report from an unidentified source.

Mere busybodies, not doing any work. There is a wordplay here in Greek: not *ergazomenous*, i.e. working, but *periergazomenous*, that is, 'being a busybody or meddling'. Those who refused to work were exploiting their free time to meddle in others' affairs. Paul would later write: <<*Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say*>> (1 Timothy 5:13), where irreligious prying flows from idleness.

¹² Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

2 Thessalonians 3:12

Paul forcefully commands the idle to get back to work, so that they may be financially independent, i.e. earn their own living. To work quietly is the opposite of being a nuisance or a busybody. Paul's teaching is consistent on this theme: <<*Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy*>> (Ephesians 4:28), and: <<*But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you*>> (1 Thessalonians 4:10b-11).

¹³ Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. ¹⁴ Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. ¹⁵ Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.

2 Thessalonians 3:13-15

The community is to keep doing good (v.13) and to discipline any unrepentant idlers (vv.14-15).

The community as a whole, particularly wealthier members exploited by the idle, might grow weary in doing what is right: <<*So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up*>>

(Galatians 6:9), but Paul calls on them to continue being charitable, albeit only to those who are deserving.

Paul believes it is very possible that some will ignore his warning and continue in their idle ways, so he instructs the community as a whole to take note of such people and have nothing to do with them as in v.6, and in: <<*I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offences, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them*>> (Romans 16:17).

Who do not obey what we say in this letter. Paul clearly intends that the whole church community have a chance to hear the contents of this letter before any action is taken. This will give any transgressors the opportunity to repent and return to the teaching they have received. The purpose of this disassociation is so that the stubbornly insubordinate believers may be ashamed, repent, and be restored to the community. Church discipline must always aim at renewing discipleship.

Disciplining a fellow Christian can easily degenerate into the community treating him as an enemy, so Paul says warn him as a believer. Church discipline must never be implemented in bitterness or anger, but in the way that a good parent would discipline an errant child. This is the way that God disciplines those whom he loves: <<*And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children – ‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts’*>> (Hebrews 12:5-6). The most effective way of disciplining someone within a family is to exclude them temporarily from family life but always leaving a way for them to come back in.

VI. 2 Thessalonians 3:16-18 - Final Greetings and Benediction

The letter concludes with a benediction, a final greeting, and a prayer requesting that the Lord's grace be with them.

¹⁶ Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you.

2 Thessalonians 3:16

Paul offers a benediction in the name of the Lord of peace. Jesus has reconciled the Thessalonian Christians to God and is at peace with them, able to replace their disturbed fear (2:2) with an experience of inner peace.

At all times and in all ways, but especially peace, as opposed to consternation regarding the end times (2:1-3:5), and peace amid ongoing persecution (1:5-10).

The Lord be with all of you. This was a common Hebrew blessing: <<*Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, ‘The Lord be with you.’ They answered, ‘The Lord bless you’*>> (Ruth 2:4). Jesus had promised to remain with his followers through his Holy Spirit: <<*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.*>>

You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you>> (John 14:16-17).

¹⁷ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. ¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.

2 Thessalonians 3:17-18

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Paul would repeat this method of authentication in other letters: <<*I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand*>> (1 Corinthians 16:21). Paul makes explicit what would have been clear to readers of the original letter, that the bulk of this letter was probably dictated to a secretary, similar to: <<*I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord*>> (Romans 16:22), and the final greeting was written in Paul's own unique handwriting, which served as a mark of authenticity: this is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write, much like signatures at the end of modern letters. Paul's highlighting of this fact may reflect a suspicion that a forgery in his name was in existence, which may have been the source of the idea that the Day of the Lord had already come. This affirmation of genuineness also shows that writing in another person's name was condemned among early Christians.

There is more information on verses that support the authentication of Paul's letters in the Supplementary Material to 1 and 2 Thessalonians on the website.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you is a blessing Paul frequently used in various arrangements; refer to Romans 16:20, Galatians 6:18, Philippians 4:23, 1 Thessalonians 5:28, 2 Timothy 4:22, and Philemon 25.

This brief benediction is one that reaches out beyond the boundaries of the 1st Century churches to all the readers of Paul's letter throughout history past and yet to come. For God's grace reaches out and embraces the whole world. The sign of that embrace is not a mark in the flesh but the presence and the joy of the Spirit. So it was in the 1st Century; so it is now, in the church and world that still needs the message like that to the Galatians or the Thessalonians. So it will be until faith is rewarded with sight, patience with the final harvest, and eager hope with fulfilment.