

Thanksgiving and Encouragement

2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

Introduction

With the primary reason for writing the second letter, exposing and refuting the false teaching they had received and helping them better understand what would happen when the Lord returns, Paul now moves to cover more general issues. There are two sections of thanksgiving and prayer in 2 Thessalonians (1:3, 11) and here in 2:13-14, 16; 3:1, 5.

2:13-14 - Thankfulness for Their Salvation

Here, Paul expresses thanksgiving for the Thessalonian's standing or status with God. He and they are part of God's great spiritual family and are loved by the Lord. This fact should amaze us since all in Christ are unworthy objects of divine favor. Paul thanked God for choosing them *from the beginning* for salvation. Paralleling Ephesians 1:4, because they decided to *believe in the truth* (2:13d), they were now part of God's great plan created before time began. The NASB has the footnote *first fruits* in verse 13, the word used in some early manuscripts, recalling the Old Testament imagery of the first part of the harvest being dedicated to the Lord. The Thessalonian church, small but significant in faith, engaged in a great struggle, needed to be reminded that they were the possession of God and the first of countless people to be harvested throughout the rest of time.

What purpose does God choose us for? *Salvation*. This is accomplished by the work of the Spirit and our belief in the truth. Sanctification is the process of being made holy or being "set apart for God. Initially, the Spirit sets us apart from sin and makes us righteous by making us *born again* (John 3:3-8) and thereby a *new creature* (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). In doing so, He changes our status before God from unacceptable to *acceptable* (Romans 15:16)³⁸. After our salvation, the Spirit continues to work in us as the work of sanctification continues, and we become more and more holy and Christlike. The teaching of progressive sanctification is seen throughout the New Testament.³⁹

There is also a human side to salvation, and Paul explains that at the end of v. 13. We must *believe in the truth*. God has chosen His people through their belief in the truth. Belief is the key word here, inherent in deep, abiding trust. Our salvation is conditioned upon our continuing dependence upon or submission to God to save us. This is accomplished by what is said in v. 15: we must *stand firm and hold to the traditions which we were taught*. So, simply put, our *belief in the truth* describes our ongoing response to the Spirit's work within us.⁴⁰

In verse 14, Paul further describes salvation, which is made possible through our response to the gospel (see also 1 Thessalonians 1:5). Paul's idea, as suggested in Romans 8:29, is that God chooses individuals based on their foreseen faith, rather than selecting them unconditionally and then ensuring they believe in Jesus. The gospel message is crystal clear about how one can attain salvation and become a part of

God's family. It is not achieved through any direct divine intervention that instigates belief but through the gospel of Christ, as stated in Acts 17:1-4. This means that the gospel of Christ is the sole source of divinely originated salvation and not any human means, including Paul. It is the only way to become a part of God's family.

The end goal of our divine calling is to partake in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. The word *obtain* in verse 14 suggests an active acquiring or obtaining of this glory, although it is not something believers earn but rather receive from God. This covers our future resurrection at Christ's return and our present experience; from the moment of conversion, we begin to share in Christ's glory (Romans 8:30), a process that starts now and will be fully realized at His return. Philippians 3:20-21 and Romans 8:17-18 speak of awaiting Jesus Christ from heaven who will transform our humble bodies to resemble His glorious one.

2:15-17 – Stand Firm

2:15 – Hold Fast to What You Have Received

The issues and misunderstandings addressed in Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians primarily stemmed from their forgetting the teachings they had received. The phrase "so then" at the beginning of verse 15 references the teachings from both letters, highlighting that many problems could have been avoided had the teachings been remembered earlier. This serves as a crucial reminder for us today.

Failure to apply biblical teaching can lead to significant difficulties, which could be resolved with proper knowledge and wisdom. Today, false teachings abound, and theological awareness is even more critical.

Paul's instruction to "stand firm" calls for doctrinal stability, urging Christians to remain deeply committed and firmly rooted in the truths of scripture. He revisits themes from 1 Thessalonians, contrasting those in the church unsettled by trials with those who maintained their stance. He urged them to "hold fast to the traditions," referring to the apostolic teachings passed down, which is what they had received via divine revelation (2 Thessalonians 3:6; 1 Corinthians 11:2). These teachings were conveyed to the Thessalonian church both orally and through writings, including the letters from Paul, ensuring they had a solid foundation in their faith. The idea here is not to be weak or vacillating but to hold their spiritual ground and keep their grip on the truth.⁴¹ We must hold fast to what has been handed down *once for all* to the saints (Jude 3; 1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:4).

Today, many people are like the Athenians described in Acts 17:21, constantly discussing the latest ideas, sometimes leading to the spread of poor theological concepts as "new truths." Church elders are tasked with being "able to teach," as stated in 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy, which involves having a solid grasp of theology and the ability to clarify complex doctrines for the local congregation. We need to value theology, although it is often mistakenly considered boring. Any dullness of theology frequently reflects the teacher's approach rather than the subject itself. Discovering the joy in exploring doctrine is essential.

2:16-17 - A Prayer for Comfort and Strength

Paul called upon God to bring his glorious power to impact the lives of those who read his message. He wanted them to realize that God had already blessed them with love (v. 13) and acted by grace (2:13-14). By this, He provided eternal comfort, enabling them to withstand any persecution they faced and the judgment of the future (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10). This led to their possession of *good hope*, a term often used in the first century to describe the expectation of life after death.⁴² No matter what the Christian faces, we can confidently face it.

Reflecting on previous prayers (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13), Paul again asks that the Thessalonians receive further encouragement, particularly given their current hardships. The prayer pairs "encourage" with "strengthen," which implies reinforcing firmness and constancy in beliefs and attitudes—apt for addressing the difficulties mentioned in the text. Paul wanted this strengthening to impact both actions and words, suggesting it would fortify their correct proclamation of the gospel amidst false teachings.

3:1-5 – General Exhortations

3:1-2 – Pray for the Furtherance of the Gospel

Paul urged the Thessalonians to pray for him and his coworkers. *Pray* is written in the present tense, like the appeal in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, where they were expected to make prayer a constant pattern. Paul asked that they pray for the success of the message in being delivered, that it spread rapidly (to advance without obstruction or hindrance), and that it be received with respect and reverence. Paul wanted the gospel to be praised, honored, and exalted.

He also asked that he would be *delivered from wicked and evil people*. This is not an unusual request for Paul as he asked the same thing from the brethren in Corinth (2 Corinthians 1:8-11) and Rome (Romans 15:31). Paul and his companions suffered greatly at the hand of their opponents:

Are they servants of Christ? I'm talking like a madman—I'm a better one: with far more labors, many more imprisonments, far worse beatings, many times near death. Five times I received the forty lashes minus one from the Jews. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times, I was shipwrecked. I have spent a night and a day in the open sea, (2 Corinthians 11:23-25).

3:3 – God's Character

In this passage, we witness a shift in Paul's focus from his safety to that of the Thessalonians, who are contrasted with their opponents in the faith. While those who oppose them lack faith, the Lord is always faithful and reliable, even in the face of human opposition. This faithfulness is the bedrock for our hope of deliverance, which may not come as we expect it to. Instead of simply preventing persecution, God's deliverance primarily involves empowering us to resist pressure and protecting us from the Evil One. However, God's provision of protection brings glory to Him, as it demonstrates the power of the cross through our endurance of suffering. Paul attributes the faithfulness here to Christ, emphasizing His return as the ultimate act of divine faithfulness.

3:4 – Obey What You Have Been Taught

The Thessalonians needed to continue to exhibit a pattern of obedience to God, something they had previously demonstrated, which Paul acknowledged in his letters (1 Thessalonians 1:3, 6–8; 3:12–13;

4:1). Confident in the Lord, Paul believed they would sustain their commitment to the teachings he imparted. He had devoted considerable time to teaching God's Word, granting him the authority to expect their compliance.

The Scriptures frequently emphasize obedience. Jesus instructed Christians to adhere to his teachings in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:20), and the gospel explicitly commands ongoing repentance and belief (Mark 1:15). Therefore, just as Paul expected of the Thessalonians, it is incumbent upon every Christian to obey the divine directives revealed throughout the New Testament.

3:5 – *Grow in Love and Endurance*

Paul hoped for the Thessalonians' continued spiritual growth and prayed that the Lord would guide their hearts towards this goal. The term "direct" or "make straight" suggests removing obstacles that might impede their spiritual progress. Paul's prayer was for the Lord to clear a path for their inner growth, allowing them to deepen their love of God.

Paul encourages the Thessalonians to reflect on God's love and commitment to them as a powerful motivator for proper conduct. In verse 5, he highlights the importance of understanding God's love for us as the critical incentive for our behavior. Instead of being urged to love God without a specific reason, Paul emphasizes the value of reflecting on Christ's perseverance as a stronger motivator. By contemplating Christ's endurance, we can be inspired to follow His example and conduct ourselves in a way that is pleasing to God. Paul prays that we will recognize God's love for us and Christ's exemplary perseverance, leading us to live appropriately.

What's In This for Us?

Value and Uphold Biblical Teachings: We must adhere to the teachings of the apostles. Maintaining a solid connection to these foundational teachings is essential in a world full of new and often misleading ideas.

Seek Spiritual Growth Through God's Guidance: We should continuously seek to grow spiritually, asking God to direct our hearts and remove any obstacles hindering our progress. This involves deepening their understanding of God's love and commitment, potent motivators for living a life that reflects Christ's character.

Persist in Faith Amidst Persecution: We must recognize the importance of endurance and perseverance in trials and persecution. We can find strength in Christ's example and rely on God's faithful protection against all forms of opposition.

Pray for the Advancement of the Gospel: We need to pray consistently for the success and rapid spread of the gospel. This includes praying for the message to be respected and revered and for the deliverance of missionaries and evangelists from hostile and evil influences.

Conclusion

By adhering to apostolic teachings, seeking spiritual growth, enduring trials with faith, and actively praying for the gospel's advancement, we can deepen our relationship with God and live out our faith more effectively. These principles not only guide us individually but also strengthen the collective witness of the church in a world rife with challenges and distractions. Ultimately, by embracing these teachings, we can better embody the love and perseverance of Christ, contributing to an authentic and impactful Christian life.

For Discussion

1. How does Paul's emphasis on holding fast to apostolic traditions apply today? What challenges do we face in maintaining these teachings?
2. How can reflecting on God's love and commitment influence our daily behavior and decisions?
3. Discuss the importance of spiritual growth according to Paul. What practical steps can we take to remove obstacles to our spiritual development?
4. How can the church apply Paul's teachings on enduring trials and persecutions today? Share personal experiences or observations.
5. Paul stresses the importance of prayer in spreading the gospel. What actions can we take to support this in our community and beyond?
6. Explore the concept of "eternal comfort" that Paul mentions. How does this promise affect the way we handle current struggles and hardships?
7. Discuss the role of faith in our salvation and sanctification. How does understanding this change our perspective on daily living and spiritual responsibilities?
8. Why might Paul have shifted his emphasis from God's faithfulness to Christ's faithfulness in this letter? What theological significance does this have?
9. Paul instructs believers to stand firm in their faith amidst false teachings. What are some contemporary false teachings that Christians need to be aware of and guard against?
10. Consider the impact of understanding our role as part of God's great plan. How does this knowledge influence our sense of purpose and our actions?

³⁸ See also 1 Corinthians 6:11; 1 Peter 1:2.

³⁹ See John 17:17; Romans 6:1-22; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 5:16-25; Philippians 3:12; Colossians 3:9-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4; 5:23; 1 Peter 1:14-16; 1 John 3:4-10.

⁴⁰ Osborne, p. 188.

⁴¹ MacArthur, p. 288.

⁴² “God’s gift of encouragement leads to hope for future life in those who receive it. The expression “good hope” was used in the Hellenistic world for life after death (cf. Otzen, “‘Gute Hoffnung,’” 283–285), and thus it is singularly appropriate in the present context.” See Wanamaker, Charles A. *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990, p. 271.