

STUDY 3 - 2 THESSALONIANS 2:13-3:5

The passage we are looking at in this study is quite short, but it is important as it really applies all we have seen so far in the letter. It would be easy to come away from studying the first chapter and a half full of discouragement and fear, but the reason God tells us these things (about the reality of suffering and the man of lawlessness) is so we are not knocked in our faith and so we are confident in him and hold onto his truth.

Like chapter 1, this part of the letter takes the form of a prayer – at the end of chapter 2 Paul reports how he is praying for the Thessalonians in the light of what he has just written, and at the start of chapter 3 he calls the Thessalonians to pray for him. If studying this passage does not move us to prayer, there is something wrong!

Pray For The Lord's Love To Stabilise You (2:13-15)

This section begins with the word “but” which points back to verses 1-12. Although there will be those under God's judgement who fall under the delusion of the man of lawlessness that will not be true of God's people, of which the Thessalonians are a part.

Paul can praise God for the Thessalonians because firstly and mainly they are “loved by the Lord”. That love has shown itself in what God has done for them. He has chosen to save them. Notice that this choice was “from the beginning” – probably referring back to eternity past. The truth that God's blessings are not just for now, but are eternal runs through this paragraph (see verse 16). We are secure because God has made a choice to love and save us and this choice is not just on a whim, but goes back before the creation of the world.

How are we saved? Notice the two sides to this. From God's sides there is “the sanctifying work of the Spirit”. We must not misunderstand this. We often think of sanctification as the ongoing process by which God deals with the remaining sin in us, and by which he makes us more and more holy. But this verse is **not** saying that that process is the grounds of our salvation. “To sanctify” means to set apart, so this verse is saying that we are saved by God setting us apart by his Spirit – to be united to Christ, to be his people. It is underlining the teaching

that Jesus gave to Nicodemus in John 3 – that to be saved we need to have been born again by the Spirit. However this is not to deny our human response to the gospel, which is God given but a necessary way in to salvation. We “believe in the truth” which we hear when the gospel is preached.

Why are we saved? Our salvation is not an end in itself. God’s purpose for us is that we “share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”. This points us back to verse 10 of chapter 1 when we are told that when Christ returns he will be glorified in his holy people. On that day Christ will be glorified – he will be seen to worthy of all praise, he will be seen to be great and God. And yet the amazing thing is that we will be glorified, as we are united to him.

Why does Paul remind the Thessalonians of their salvation? Because he wants them to keep going. The way to keep going is simply to “stand firm” – not move away from Christ, by holding on to the apostolic teaching of the gospel. They are to remember and teach and defend and obey what Paul taught them while he was in Thessalonica and what he has written to them. For us this means holding on to the Biblical gospel. This makes sense once we see how we have been saved in the first place (verse 13/14). The way in is the way on.

Pray For The Lord’s Hope To Encourage You (2:16-17)

Paul also prays, as he did at the end of chapter 1 that the Thessalonians would keep going their good deeds and words – their acts which flow from their faith. But more than simply praying that they would increase he prays that they would be encouraged by the Lord as they do them.

What encouragement does the Lord provide? Notice it is “eternal” encouragement. The encouragement which looks back to eternity past as we see his love and good grace in action as he chose us before the creation of the world and saved us by Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection. But more than even eternity past, we are encouraged by God’s love for us in eternity future, as we remember the hope we have in Christ – our future glorification with him and eternity worshipping him.

So often when we think about the here and now we are discouraged. The Thessalonians certainly would have been as they were persecuted. But Paul

prays that our minds will be directed to our great future hope which will then give us the strength to keep going.

Pray for The Lord's Message To Spread As It Did To You (3:1-2)

As Paul writes this letter he knows he needs the Thessalonians as much as they need him, so he writes to request prayer from them. His request is tied in with the theme of the letter – it is that the message of the gospel will spread and be received with faith. Paul is not praying this for the sake of his reputation. He simply wants this great message to be heard by all, and to be responded to rightly “be honoured”. The Thessalonians know this is a prayer that will be answered, they can look at their own lives for the evidence!

Paul also wants prayer that they will be delivered “from wicked and evil men”, men who do not have faith in the gospel, men like those who are opposing the gospel. It is likely that Paul is particularly referring to those who ought to have faith but don't – particularly Jewish people who ought to receive the gospel as the great climax to their story but instead violently reject it. This prayer is linked to the prayer of verse 1. The reason he wants deliverance from these people is not that he is afraid of suffering, but because this slows down the progress of the gospel.

Give Thanks that the Lord is Faithful (3:3-5)

As Paul draws these prayers together he fixes our minds on God again, and encourages the Thessalonians that no matter how difficult things may seem, for him or for them, God is in control. It may feel like they are at the mercy of their enemies, but God will “strengthen and protect you from the evil one”. This does not mean that Christians won't suffer, or even die at the hands of enemies, but that Satan cannot remove God's people from the hands of their Father.

In the light of this Paul can pray confidently that the Thessalonians will keep going, and as they do this he calls them to fix their eyes not on their own progress but on Christ – on God's love revealed in him and on to his perseverance, a perseverance which went through the deepest of all suffering. His perseverance is an example to us. More than that however, his

perseverance is an encouragement to us that we will persevere and make it to glory as we are united to him.

As you close the study it is worth taking a step back and thinking about this prayer as a whole, and perhaps also looking at the other prayers recorded in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. We should be taught about how to pray by these prayers. They are all very Christ centred, and Paul's central passion is the spread of the word of God – around the world and in the lives of the Thessalonians. He knows that prayer is essential, yet they are prayers which flow from faith in God, not crippling fear that the Thessalonians will fall or that people won't become Christians.

In church life and in house groups our prayer times can easily descend into "organ recitals" where we simply pray for what's going wrong with different parts of the body (we pray for John's heart, or Betty's ankle etc not that there is anything wrong for praying for healing), we need to be reminded to focus on and pray for what is essential – the progress of the gospel.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

These verses begin with "but". What is the connection with what verses 1-12?

In verses 12 and 13 Paul thanks God for the salvation of the Thessalonians. Trace through these verses all the stages of this – when did their salvation begin, how were they saved, what are they saved for etc)

How were they, and how are we to "stand firm"?

When are we most discouraged as Christians? What is the remedy for discouragement – see verses 16-17?

What does Paul most want prayer for (3:1)? What is the right response to the Lord's message?

Is Paul's prayer in verse 2 simply a prayer that he would avoid suffering? If not, why not?

When Paul prays for the young Thessalonian church, is he full of fear or faith? Why?

What should we be directed into (verse 5). What is significant about “Christ’s perseverance”? Surely it’s our perseverance that matters?

What does this passage teach us about how to pray for each other, and for the church? What should our priorities be?