

STUDY 3 – 1 THESSALONIANS 2:17-3:13

This very personal section of the letter follows on from the previous section as Paul stresses how much he loved the Thessalonian church, and how deeply concerned he was for them. He lets us into his heart in these verses, and we see what it is that motivated him to endure the hardship he went through for the sake of the gospel. We've all met people who say they love people, but who can't seem to stand individuals, but Paul was not like that. He longed that people who come to know Jesus, and he longed that specific individuals and specific groups of people would keep trusting Christ until the end.

In verses 17-20 Paul explains why he has not returned to Thessalonica to visit the church personally. It is not because he did not want to, or did not care about them. When he had to leave (see Acts 17:10) it was painful for him, he was "torn away", the word used there is often used for a bereaved parent. It was an unnatural thing for him to leave at the point he did, but it was unavoidable. He wanted to return, he was thinking about them all the time and indeed he tried to return many times but intriguingly he says that "Satan stopped us". By saying this, this verse is not suggesting that Satan is out of God's control – but that the opposition to Paul and the Thessalonians was Satanic in its hostility to God (look back to 2:15-16). Paul loved the Thessalonians so much because they were his "hope, joy or crown in which we will glory when the Lord Jesus Christ comes". When Christ returns the fact that the Thessalonians will be there will give Paul great joy – and he pressed on in the work with that focus. He was not solely concerned for numbers of converts now. This was why he was so desperate to hear about them. He wanted to know whether they were pressing on now and heading towards that goal.

The challenge of those verses is whether the coming of Christ figures as much in our thinking as it so obviously did in Paul's. Is that day what we are focused on as we live now? Are we concerned, not simply that people turn to Christ now, but that they press on and reach the presence of Christ? The true Christian perseveres. Someone with true gospel hope will endure (see 1:3).

In 3:1-10 Paul writes about what he did to make sure he heard news from the Thessalonians. Again he emphasises how his life was now bound up with the

life of this new church. Notice how he repeats “when we could stand it no longer” in verses 1 and 5. Paul was not in a position to get to them personally, so he sent Timothy. We should not underestimate what a sacrifice this was for Paul. He was travelling with a very small team, and facing great opposition wherever he went. It is a sign of how concerned he was for this church that he felt he would rather be without Timothy, his protégé, than not to know how the Thessalonians were getting on. He sent Timothy to “strengthen” and “encourage” them – basically to pick up where Paul had left off in his ministry amongst them (see 2:12), particularly to remind them that suffering for the gospel is normal and not unusual. Remember he had left this new church in Thessalonica with hostile Jews jealous of Paul’s success. Paul’s great worry was that due to the persecution they would be tempted away from the gospel, and that Paul’s work in Thessalonica would come to nothing.

Timothy returned with good news (verse 6), so Paul writes this letter. Paul’s excitement is not that they are physically safe, but that the Thessalonian church bore the marks of real Christian life. Despite efforts to blacken their name, they had pleasant memories of Paul and his team (verse 6). They have true faith (verse 7). The fact that the Thessalonians were standing firm and full of joy meant that Paul could stand firm and be full of joy (verses 8 and 9). Yet he still longed to see them face to face to help them (verse 10). To “supply what is lacking” is not meant to imply that they had a faulty faith, but that Paul longed to strengthen them and build them up.

In verses 11 to 13 Paul records another prayer for the Thessalonian church. There are three requests. In verse 11 he asks that he may visit them. In verse 12 he asks that their love for each other may overflow, in the same way that his love overflows for them. This request shows us that the preceding verses have not just been a personal digression, but that we are meant to use Paul’s love for the Thessalonians as a model for how we love each other. In verse 13 he asks that they will be strengthened so that they may be holy when Jesus returns – returning to the theme of Christ’s return he mentioned back in 2:19-20 and showing once again how it was the motivation for all he did.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Why has Paul not visited the Thessalonians since he left them? Is it because he did not care about them?

How does he describe the Thessalonian church in 2:19-20?

How should the return of Christ affect how we serve people? What is it that can tempt us not to have that perspective?

How did Paul practically show his love for the Thessalonians (3:1-2)?

Why did they need to be encouraged?

What news did Timothy bring back? What was Paul's response to that news? How do we feel when we hear good news about fellow Christians and other churches?

What does Paul pray for in 3:11-13

- For himself?
- For the Thessalonians?

Where is his focus and motivation for what he prays? Is that our focus and motivation in our prayers for others?