

Shepherding Notes

2 Thessalonians

By Mike Neglia

While still in Corinth, Paul writes this second epistle to the church at Thessalonica. Later in this letter, he will correct a misconception about the Lord Jesus Christ's second coming. Here in the first chapter, the apostle will encourage the Thessalonians by praising their faith, love, and perseverance in affliction; by promising that at the Lord's actual return He will punish those who are afflicting them; and by promising that they will be glorified at Christ's return.

Praise

Sometimes Christians are hesitant to acknowledge and commend the good things that we see in each other, fearing we might promote prideful attitudes. Although it is wise to avoid anything that could cause a brother or sister to stumble in this area, I believe many of us have gone too far and end up saying nothing at all. Here Paul strikes a beautiful middle ground — he commends the Thessalonians for their outstanding example but gives God the praise for it. "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing."

Before moving on, it is essential to mention that their faith is growing — it is not stagnant. Sometimes we get frustrated with our own lack of growth, and we do not notice that we are improving and being conformed into Christ's image over time. It is precisely at these moments when encouragement from other believers is most valuable and necessary.

Payback

The Thessalonians were suffering at the time of this letter, so Paul felt the need to remind them that even in the midst of their suffering, God was working. He was sanctifying them in their afflictions. Now, even though the Lord means the evil acts of men for His purposes, the men who commit these evil acts are ultimately and solely responsible for them. That is why Paul can comfort them by promising that the Lord will punish those who persecute His people. This is not to say that we should seek vengeance upon our enemies, or even wish God's vengeance upon our enemies — we should be praying for all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Rather, this is assurance that God, the Judge of the universe, sees all things, and that He will by no means allow the guilty to go unpunished.

Promise

Not only will the unrighteous be punished for eternity, being separated from God's gracious presence, but those made righteous by Christ will be glorified in Him. And all believers will see, rejoice, and take part in this glorification. Christ will be glorified in them, as they are glorified in Him. This is a wonderful, precious promise to all believers of all time, and we should take a moment each day to reflect and meditate on the fact that this future awaits us.

Prayer

Paul ends his first chapter by reminding the Thessalonians that he is praying for them. But if you look closely, he is not specifically telling them that he is praying that their affliction will stop. On the contrary, he writes: "To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of His calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by His power..." He is praying that God would sanctify them, that God would enable them to continue on in faith and good works. He wants the Thessalonians to know that their suffering was producing sanctification. So Paul prays for strength for them to endure.

At the end of this chapter, Paul provides the motivation for all that we do: the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us think on this.

"Even in the midst of our suffering, God is working. He is sanctifying us in our afflictions. Know that the Lord is active even today."

Paul here addresses the false teaching that had arisen in Thessalonica that the Day of the Lord had already come. He reminds them of something that he had told them while he was with them. Nevertheless, he reminds them of a few things that must take place before the Day of the Lord.

Future Day

Anyone who has been a Christian for any amount of time has been told by someone that Jesus is returning soon because of something going on in the world — a war, a meteorological event, some world leader's name transcribed into numbers; take your pick. Now although it is true that the Lord can return at any time, and no one knows the day or the hour, there will be certain signs that precede His second coming.

Here in our text, there was a teaching that supposedly came from Paul in a letter informing the Thessalonians that the Lord had already come. Paul makes clear that was not the case. He tells them that what would precede the Lord's coming would be a time of rebellion headed by a satanically inspired man of lawlessness. Throughout the church age, there have been many men that Christians have identified as this man of lawlessness. For our purposes here, I will simply put forth the fact that the Day of the Lord will be a worldwide event — it will not come and go without the church knowing for certain. And although Satan will be active in the events, it is the Lord who is sovereign over all things, for He has ordained all things that come to pass, including the revelation of the man of lawlessness.

Firmly Stand

Therefore, since our Lord is sovereign, and He has chosen to save us, and this salvation not only includes being justified (declared righteous) but being sanctified (made holy), as well as persevering to the end leading to our being glorified — we are to stand firm in our faith. When we hear rumors of things and are fearful, we must turn to His revealed Word, which is the Bible. We need to meditate on what we know to be true, and not be shaken by the latest world news report. In addition, Paul here purposely refers to all three members of the Trinity in his admonition to remain steadfast: "God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this He called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Foundational Prayer

Paul then in verses 16–17 prays for the Thessalonians, and I must point out that only twenty years or so after the crucifixion, Paul not only links Jesus with God the Father, but he mentions Him first: "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word." The substance of his prayer, once again, was for them to continue in their good works, but this time he asks God to comfort their hearts through His grace.

"Let us not be tossed to and fro by every world event, but let us calmly look to the Lord Jesus to calm our hearts and enable us to stand firm in our faith and proclamation of the gospel."

Paul concludes this letter to the Thessalonians by requesting prayer from them, by asking them to practice what he practiced while with them, and finally by praying for them. There is something for us to learn in each point that he makes here in chapter 3.

Pray for Us

There is something sweet about Paul asking the Thessalonians to pray that other churches would follow their example in faith and obedience. Paul is sharing with them that he is encountering or anticipates encountering much opposition to the message, and he is counting on them to lift him and his team up to the Lord. He asks them to pray for his deliverance from evil men. He then takes the opportunity to contrast faithless men with a faithful God — even though Paul is concerned with the evil that he will encounter, he assures the Thessalonians that God will establish them and guard them against the evil one.

In my own life, I have often been blessed when encouraging a brother with similar words. Not only was I blessed by encouraging someone else, I was blessed by hearing the word of the Lord as I spoke it to him! We must learn to pray for others, ask others for prayer, and also to encourage one another with the promises of the Lord.

Provide for Yourself

When Paul and his team were among them, they worked hard to support themselves and did not rely on the church to provide for their physical needs. Although faithful pastors, traveling ministers, and evangelists are more than worthy of receiving room and board, Paul aimed to remove all potential obstacles to the gospel being proclaimed and taking root among them. Here, he exhorts all to work in order to provide for their families. It is true that the church should care for one another, especially our widows, the weak, and those unable to work. Paul, however, makes it abundantly clear that if one is physically able, then he should be providing for himself and his family. He even makes the striking statement that if someone does not work, he should not eat! Paul, although using harsh language here, directs the church not to treat a lazy person as an unbeliever, but rather to strongly encourage them to step up and do what needs to be done.

Paul's Peaceful Prayer

In verses 16–18, Paul prays for the Thessalonians to have peace. This does not contradict everything Paul has said or prayed previously. Peace can be obtained even during the most turbulent of circumstances. Peace in this context is not the absence of trials — rather, it is the calm assurance that the Lord is for us. There are times in a Christian's walk in which the Lord wills painful circumstances for us. In our heads, we may understand that this is for our good, but oftentimes in our hearts we question why. Paul prays that his readers would experience the supernatural peace that transcends all understanding. That is my prayer for you this day.

"Brothers and sisters, let us seek the Lord on behalf of one another. Let us work hard, let us lovingly exhort one another, and let us seek peace in our hearts during the troubling times ahead."