

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

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2 Thessalonians 3:1–18 (NIV)

“Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat.’ We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right. If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. I, Paul, write

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.”

There’s a kind of quietness in this chapter compared to where we were last week in chapter 2.

The thunder of 2 Thessalonians comes in the second chapter, where the Thessalonian believers

are very much in anxiety over the possibility that the day of the Lord had come. The day of

God’s wrath was being outpoured. They were experiencing persecution. They interpreted that to

be God’s wrath upon them. Perhaps they had missed it all. Perhaps their faith was in vain. They

were young Christians—maybe Christians no more than a year and a half. They were disturbed.

So Paul, in resounding terms in chapter 2, brings home the great truth of the gospel. That God

himself has control of the future and that certain things cannot happen without his design,

without His permission, and without his placement.

Chapter 3 kind of comes in as the interlude of that great strong echo part of the Thessalonian

letter. Paul has two major concerns to share with these believers before he parts. One concern is

related to the matter of prayer. We see that concern expressed in verses 1–5. The other concern

that he has for them is the issue of work. Their constant problem was that temptation avoid the

responsibilities of daily work. So once more, he will speak to them on that matter in verses 6–13.

In the verses on prayer (1–5), Paul is directing us to the matter to prepare Christian leaders,

pastors. He’s asking for prayer for himself, for example. He also, in these verses, is relating the

dominating theme of prayer, which he has for the Thessalonian believers—what he’s asking God

to do for them.

Before we look specifically at what Paul asked people to pray in regard to him, we should look

momentarily at who he asks to pray for him. Because that is also important. What we pray and

who prays for us are twin themes in this Thessalonian letter. As I was reading what Paul told the

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

Thessalonian believers to pray for him, my mind was triggered to recall that, in Paul's letters, I hadn't really remembered seeing many occasions that Paul asked people to pray for him. There are numerous occasions where Paul is enjoining other people to pray. Telling them to pray for some kind of matter to happen. There are numerous times when he indicates that he himself prays unceasingly. There are times when his letters just all of a sudden stop and he breaks out in a prayer, then he goes on. But there seem to be few occasions when he asked people to pray for him as an individual.

As I leafed through Paul's thirteen letters, that impression was an accurate one. Indeed he had not asked people on many occasions to pray for him. In fact, in all of Paul's thirteen letters, there are only eight occasions where he asked people to pray for him, and usually he asks simply one time of one group. With the Thessalonians, he breaks the rule. In 1 Thessalonians 5:25, he says "Brethren, pray for us." Then in 2 Thessalonians 3, he repeats the theme of praying for him.

Then he notes a specific request.

It's fascinating to go through Paul's letters and discover that 1 Thessalonians was probably his first letter. It could have been his second letter. In that letter, where he asked people to pray for him, he simply said, "Brethren, pray for us." But never again did he ever state it so shortly. From then on, whenever he asked somebody to pray for him, he would tell them what to pray for.

There are some things to be learned concerning concreteness in prayer. Paul learned, as his discipleship went on and matured, to not simply ask generalized kinds of things. But he gave them something concrete to pray for. In writing to the Romans, chapter 15, he asked these Christians (and he's never met most of them) to pray for him. He asked the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 1. One time he asked them to pray for him. When he is in prison in Rome, during his first imprisonment. He writes the Ephesians. He writes the Philippians. He writes the Colossians.

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

He writes Philemon. In all four letters, he requests prayer. Never does he ask prayer of the Galatians. I think, if you read the Galatian letter, you'd understand why. These were people who had walked away from the faith. Who had another gospel—a different gospel—who weren't really serving Christ, but had given themselves to legalism, which wasn't Christianity.

Interestingly enough, he never asked in the pastoral letters, Timothy or Titus, for prayer. Why? I tried to sort out and reason and make an educated guess. I would guess that Paul is in his last imprisonment and particularly 2 Timothy reflects that. His work is done. Intuitively and spiritually, he seems to know it. There's no more point as such in praying for him, because he has finished his course. So instead of asking people to commiserate with him in his difficulty, he is turning their attention to other things. And turning the attention of Timothy and Titus to their responsibilities, and to pray for the people who still have got work ahead of them. It's kind of a fascinating study in spiritual maturity to see this prayer life emerge from the apostle Paul and to see what he's asking people to pray for.

Paul, in his asking people to pray for him, never asked a perfect person to pray for him. The reason why I say that is because the letters he writes reflect some kind of situation emerging within the church, or in the case of Philemon, a person who doesn't treat his servant right. All these people have glaring deficiencies. Some of them have doctrinal deficiencies. Some of them have moral deficiencies. But in all situations, Paul never is able to confront a perfect church and say to a perfect people, "Pray for me."

There is something winsome, something attractive, about the character of an apostle or a disciple of Jesus Christ who recognizes that he may be more spiritually advanced than someone else. And I would certainly understand Paul to be spiritually advanced and mature. But he, in the advanced state of maturity that he is in, still needs the prayers of other individuals who have not pressed as

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

far into the gospel as he has. There is no sense of his saying, “I don’t need you. I’m the apostle Paul!” Never does he have this attitude—that he doesn’t need other people. But he asks these individuals to join with him in prayer. That is the feeling that I want to communicate to us as well—that God expects us to come to Him in prayer for one another. Even when we have unresolved issues in our life. If we quit praying, then what do we have left?

From these young maturing Christians, Paul asks for prayer from them. He’s not a person to ask for prayer from people whose weaknesses he knew. We shouldn’t be afraid to do that in a family setting, where we know the weaknesses of our husband or wife, to ask them to pray for us. Or in a church setting, where we really get close to one another and know each other’s weaknesses. Praise God that through it there can be a kind of glaze of love placed over everything, where we can pray for one another.

Paul, in asking prayer, however, limits himself to two basic requests. The requests are noted here in the Thessalonian letter. He requests, first of all, that the Word of the Lord might speed on and triumph. That’s his first request. And his second request is that he may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for all do not have faith.

As I have looked through these eight prayers where Paul is asking people to pray for him, never do I find a prayer that he asks that really fits outside one of these two categories. It seems that this man was dominated by two concerns and wanted prayer only in two areas, really. First, in respect to the fact that the Word of God might speed on or run on in triumph. And secondly, deliverance. Never is he found asking people to pray that he would be saved from difficulty or from pressure or from trial. Or never does he ask people to pray that he have an easy life or a comfortable existence. But his concern, his gut level concern, is with the advancement of the Word of the Lord and his own personal ability to keep on going with that work.

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

Why does he pray that the Word of the Lord speed on? What's so important about that Word?

That Word is important from Romans 10:8–9, where Paul declares to us by the word of the Spirit that, “The word is near you, even on your lips and in your heart that if you will confess the Lord Jesus Christ with your lips and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead you will be saved.” That's the Word which Paul is talking about. It is that Word which he wants to see run or speed on. A Word which finds the day of liberation, the day of release, occurring in individual life after individual life. He wants to see the gospel go forward.

That gospel had had a marvelous forward thrust among the Thessalonians. When we first began looking at these letters, we noted in chapter 1:8, that the Word of the Lord had come to the Thessalonians with such tremendous power that “You became an example to all believers at Macedonia and Achaia. The Word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia and your faith in God has gone forth everywhere.” Within a short matter of time, a matter of months, the gospel had literally ran out of Thessalonica, over the area of the Mediterranean world. They had known the power of an expanding, running, vibrant Word.

This has really been affecting me as I have realized that the apostle Paul asked people that he pastored to pray for him. Then I realized, if I were going to make an application of this word, I would have to say something about your relationship with me. I wish you would pray for me.

What do I wish you would pray? I wish that you would pray, not that things would get easier for me, not that things would become more comfortable for me. I wish you would pray for me, that somehow as a leader or a servant placed in this body, God would grant me the wisdom and the power to see His Word run. To literally see it run.

Many times the Christian life is described as a walk. That's kind of the rate at which we progress. We walk. But the Word of the Lord can go so much faster. So we never see a term

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

being used, “the Word of the Lord walks.” But “the Word of the Lord runs.” When the Word of the Lord is running, it doesn’t run out of breath. In fact, I doubt it spurts. Sometimes, our Christian commitment may be in terms of spurts. We have periods of real spiritual emphasis and growth, and then we kind of sag. But that isn’t the normal way the Word of God is intended to work. It is intended to run. Thessalonica had known that dimension of the Spirit’s work, which found them constantly on the cutting edge and thirsty. You can call it revival, church growth. You can say, “God changing individual lives.” Whatever term you want to use. That’s how the Word of the Lord ran. Everyday, pray that the Word of God may run, because the Word of the Lord really doesn’t run out of steam. When the Word of God is running, it wins the crown of triumph. That’s what Paul says—that it may run and triumph. A message from God that did nothing could not be described as being glorified or could not be described as being triumphant. If nothing was happening in this body every time the Word of God was shared, if nothing was coming out of this, then the Word of God would be disgraced, because I have not been sharing my word. I’ve been sharing with you the Word of God. And if that Word of God isn’t doing anything in our body, then the Word is disgraced and it has not triumphed. But I know differently. I know that the Word of God, in individual lives, is triumphing. And it will continue to do more and more. I pray that not only will the Word of God triumph in terms of quantity of individual’s reach, but that the Word of God will triumph in terms of the quality of our experience. So that area of your life, which is unbending and unyielding and unsubmitive to God and still living for self, will capitulate to the instruction of the Word of God, the liberating Word of love and truth, so that the Word may run on and triumph in you.

It took a year and a half for the Thessalonians to get this letter. They had made such incredible progress in that time. If people are praying for the Word of God to have an immediate effect in

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

their life, what it took one person fifteen years to reach in terms of spiritual maturity, another person can just as easily, by the divining of the Holy Spirit and sincerity, reach that period in a very short period of time. The Word of God can run.

And Paul says in relation to the Thessalonians praying, “Pray not only that the Word may run, but pray that I’ll be delivered.” Why does he want to be delivered? For himself or his own personal safety? Not at all. Delivered so that he can continue to proclaim the gospel. It seems to be the kind of dominating emphasis of his life. To the Corinthians, he writes, in 1 Corinthians 16, “I will stay at Ephesus until Pentecost, for a door of effective work has opened for me. But there are many adversaries.” Twin themes again. An open door but many adversaries. Here in Thessalonians we see it.

Having asked that people to pray for him, Paul goes on to indicate what he is praying for his church. And what, as pastor, I should be praying for you. He indicates, in verse 2, that not all men have faith, the Christian faith, the gospel. But the fact that not all men have faith reminds him that there is one who has perfect faith. That is God. So, therefore, the Lord is faithful. He will strengthen you and guard you. That is to say that Paul realizes the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian was to give him fortitude, inner strength to face crisis and persecution. And when the Holy Spirit had accomplished that in life also, he sets a guard around us, so that we can be safe in Him. Paul indicates, “We have confidence in the Lord about you. You are doing and will do the things which we command.” Then his prayer comes. “May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ” (2 Thessalonians 3:5).

Once more, I was drawn to the kind of things he asks for when he was praying. I notice that, generally in the prayers which are stated in his letters, he does not do event kind of praying,

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

“Lord, let this ‘event’ happen to someone.” There is that kind of praying, but that’s not the stress of his prayer. He stresses the qualities of inner life that God wants to develop in His people.

I. And what quality does God want to develop the most? The quality that “God is love.”

And so he prays, “And may the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God.” That love which is so upon you, that sometimes in your sleep, both natural and spiritual, you do not recognize as being there. There is something about God which is transcending our experience every moment. A love which we must realize. You see now why Paul sometimes prayed for Christians to grow into maturity and grow into the love of Christ. What a great thing for a child to grow up and be able to communicate that love back to parents.

“May the Lord direct you to the love of God.” There are so many other things we can be directed to. The Thessalonians could be directed to a lot of things. They had lots of pressures on them. They had real life persecutions of the faith. Some of them were perhaps even losing their life for the gospel, and their thoughts could go elsewhere. Paul’s saying, “Bring it back, bring your thoughts back to the love of God.”

“Behold what manner of love the Father has shown unto us that we should be called his children!” (1 John 3:1). Direct your hearts to the love of God, to the love that God has for you. Meditate in that. Realize your worth, your significance in God’s sight. Realize what He’s done for you in Jesus Christ. Realize how He bends over you and loves you. And once having realized the love of God for you, also direct your attention to the love which you may express toward God. And, in turn, the love which you may express to someone else. May God direct you to that love.

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

The Thessalonians needed that message, because they were a lot more afraid of God than they were loving God. The Second Coming scared them out of their mind. What is an antidote to the false kind of fear of the Lord? It is to understand that “God is love” (1 John 4:16).

II. Paul not only prayed that they should be directed to the love of God, but also that they should be directed to the steadfastness of Jesus Christ.

Do you know that the word “steadfast” happens to be my favorite word in the New Testament? Coming from two Greek words “to remain” and “under”—“to remain under pressure.”

Steadfastness. It speaks of a person who has something great that is pressing against him. He has the ability by the Holy Spirit to stand, to not leave his post, and to take the pressure.

Jesus Christ was steadfast. Hebrews uses that word, “Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus stuck it out.

How are we pointed to the steadfastness of Christ? We’re pointed to the steadfastness of Christ when we do not walk away from our responsibilities, but when we fulfill them. When we do not walk away from a child. When we do not walk away from a marriage. When we do not walk away from a job out of spite. When we do not walk away from another person just because we have a disagreement with them. Called to the steadfastness of Christ—to the sense of responsibility.

Steadfastness. That is a deep expression of the Spirit of God. It’s that Spirit that God wants to be at work in us, that when I’m tempted to run, leave my post of assignment, leave the place God has given to me and the people God has given—God is always drawing me back and saying, “Direct your heart to the steadfastness of Christ.” Don’t we all have times when we’d rather throw it all overboard? When we’d like to say good-bye? May God direct us to the steadfastness of Christ, who never walked away from responsibility, who never walked away from pressure,

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

who never walked away from trials and suffering, but endured them on our behalf. He went the way of the cross. He walked *to* the cross—not away from it. God wants us to have that unbendable experience, that strength of character and inner resolve which finds us standing true to the Lord.

It's fascinating that the New Testament uses two words for "patience." One is this word "steadfastness," the ability to bear up under circumstances. And the other is a word which is used of patience in reference to people. It means "long temperedness," "long angeredness." In reference to people, this is the quality to be developed. In reference to circumstances, steadfastness. May God direct you to that.

III. Work: Paul's talking to the Thessalonians that they ought to work and they ought to keep away from people who were truant.

That's the meaning of "idleness," to play truant. There were individuals of the Thessalonian church who wanted to cop out of their responsibilities. Paul knew that there were people who liked to be caught up in the mysteries of the Christian doctrine who weren't all that interested in getting caught up in Christian duty. Those were the Thessalonians—running from one esoteric truth to another. One beautiful glistening gem of Holy Spirit unction to another, without ever getting down to really living on the ground and getting back to their jobs. I doubt the Thessalonians' jobs were any more exciting than some of ours.

What does the Lord want us to do in them? He knows it if we're idle. It's a lot worse to lay at home complaining about your job, lay around till noon every day—you'd get miserable. You'd be better off to work at that boring job, earning a living for your family and giving witness for the faith, than staying home and simply watching television everyday, and staying up late every night, and getting up late every morning. You'd be miserable.

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

Paul says, “If a person claims to be so super-spiritual, he doesn’t need to work. If he claims to have a super-spiritual angelic life, then let him eat angel food! He’s got to work or he can’t eat. Go on being busy in your work.”

IV. Paul closes the letter with a word of peace and grace, his two characteristic words.

Always the peace of God resting upon him and always the grace of God. When he says, at the close of the letter, “I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write” (2 Thessalonians 3:17).

He probably was reflecting the idea that he had dictated the letter to one of his associates, who had perhaps better penmanship than the apostle Paul. Now, at the end of the letter, he adds some words, some kind of a mark to identify the letter as his.

But there’s another mark of the letter that isn’t anything that we can see on a transcript. It’s the mark of grace which is upon this letter. That’s Paul’s mark. Wherever he goes, he says the word “grace.” Some people use grace in the wrong way. It’s interesting that the person in the New Testament who used grace the most was the person who had his life most dedicated to God, every inch of his life was unyielding to sin, righteous for God, valiant for truth. And that’s the person who uses the word “grace” the most. “Grace” is not a cheap word. It’s not a word to be used when we simply mishandle ourselves in the presence of God and then, with a wave of the hand and lack of concern, say, “The grace of God upon me.”

Thank God also that there are persons who understand the meaning of grace. Who, when every aspect of life that can be given to God has been given, every duty that can be done has been done, nevertheless never rests in his own pride of attainment but stands as the apostle Paul, in the direct consciousness of the need of the grace of God. That “I can only go so far” and beyond that, I still need the resources of God, the overlooking ability of Christ to see beyond my sins,

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

past my sins into my heart, and to release His forgiveness and His healing to me. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all” (2 Thessalonians 3:18).

There’s not one of you in this room who doesn’t stand in need of grace. No matter how good you are, no matter how far you’ve gone in the gospel, you are in need of grace. I’m in need of grace today. I need God to look past my glaring personal deficiencies and to apply the righteousness of Jesus Christ to me.

Did the Word of God work at Thessalonica? I sometimes wonder. I wonder if these people got back to work. I wonder if they quit arguing about the day of the Lord and the Second Coming. I wonder if they solved their differences. I kind of think they did. That was the way the Word was at work in them. When they heard the Word on the first occasion, they became obedient to it and became saved.

Furthermore, when Paul prays for them in 3:4, he says, “We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command.” So he has reason to believe that they are going to act on that Word.

That’s a good feeling for me, because I speak to you, week after week, and sometimes when I’m alone, I wonder, “Is it doing any good? Is the Word of God being heard?” Satan has unique ways of attacking human beings. One is through discouragement. Yet because it is not my word which I share with you but the Word of God, I rest in the confidence that the Word is at work. It is being done. God sees that and you know that and feel it and we share it together. That’s what counts.

Closing Prayer

We bring to You once more in this moment, heavenly Father, our individual praise and love, our individual desires to be so closely related to You. I bring to You our fears. Fears of our failures,

WORK AND PRAY

2 Thessalonians 3

fears that we'll miss the Second Coming. Fears that we really aren't succeeding in our Christian life. I bring to you those fears. On behalf of this people, I confess them. I turn to You for Your healing and for Your mercy. I bring to You the individual needs on behalf of persons here who are in friction with one another, who haven't prayed for one another, who haven't really loved one another. I don't bring these needs so much because I know who these persons are, but because I am aware that in a group like this, that condition will exist. I pray what Paul prayed. That this very day you would direct our hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. I pray that a deep work of healing and release will be done in the inner man right now as we pray. That You will accomplish Your work of healing and melding. And through Jesus Christ, may Your Word run on in triumph. We see the moment now. We think of the Word of Jesus, that when His disciples came back to Him reporting that demons had been cast out, Jesus saw that small event as being a foretaste that Satan himself had fallen from heaven. We see that in our midst. We see the group of persons whose lives You have transformed. And in the transformation, You have wrought in us, we see, that greater work of Your Word—praise Your name—running on in triumph. Thank You for this precious moment we have in Your presence. Release us to be joyous. Release us to love. Release us to serve You this week, this day, through Jesus, our Lord. Amen.