

Thessalonians
Week 8: Final Word

I. We're finishing up an 8-week series through the Letters to the Thessalonians so if you'd like to start making your way to 2 Thessalonians 3, please do.

A. 2 Thessalonians 3. We've looked at the contexts of these two letters that were written about 50 A.D. by the Apostle Paul. He wrote to the church of Thessaloniki who he had physically ministered to previously. But due to persecution, he was forced to flee the city and has been prevented from returning. The believers in Thessaloniki are also facing external pressure from their fellow citizens to the point they believe that Jesus has abandoned them. That the rapture or gathering of believers to Jesus has already occurred and they did not make the cut. Paul corrects this false teaching by clarifying that the Day of the Lord has not occurred. It will be unmistakable. In the interim, continue to keep strong in your faith and don't lose:

1. Hope!

We defined hope a few weeks ago by stating that hope is confidence that God will fulfill the promises He has declared to His people! Hope is forward looking but it isn't disconnected from our faith. Faith is our response to God for what He has already done. If God has sent His Son to die for the sins of the world and resurrected Him through His very Spirit, what else would He need to do to prove He'll make good on His future promises?

Answer: Nothing!

II. In 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, Paul is going to share his final thoughts with the church in Thessaloniki. My translation, the Christian Standard Bible, begins chapter 3 with, "In addition." The phrase is better rendered, "Finally." But Paul like a good preacher is going to get in a few subpoints under his final point. Pastors have been messing up Sunday lunch for a long time! Let's dive into this final point (points) of 2 Thessalonians.

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5 – 1 In addition, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you, 2 and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not all have faith. 3 But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen and guard you from the evil one. 4 We have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. 5 May the Lord direct your hearts to God's love and Christ's endurance.

A. Throughout his letters, Paul never peddles a shallow Christian faith. The kingdom of Jesus is breaking forth in the midst of a broken world and His kingdom isn't political or military in form. Jesus's kingdom expands through the transformation of a human heart. A heart that accepts the love of God and reorients one's life to express that love through our transforming lives. Love is not weak. Love is striving for the highest good of another even at personal costs. In that way, love and truth are inseparable.

1. A lifestyle oriented around the love of Jesus is an impossible task apart from God's Spirit. That is why Paul is beginning with a call to mutual prayer. And not just a flippant prayer. It is a continual submission to the Lord for His power in the face of life's problems. Life isn't all a spiritual battle, but spiritual warfare is always a reality in the Christian life! When we declare allegiance to Jesus, we simultaneously declare ourselves to be an enemy of Satan and the powers, rulers, and principalities of this world as Ephesians states. There is no neutral zone. Our task is to spread the word of the Lord and see that it's honored wherever we have the opportunity.

a. We're not called to spread our opinions, but the gospel of Jesus Christ contained in His word. It's not "if" there will be opposition but "when." We go out into the market square, and we think everyone has faith. Not all have faith. This might come across as harsh, but it's true, a rejection of Jesus is an allegiance to Satan. Life isn't like a game of neighborhood football with two captains and sides chosen. In Adam, all sinned. I can't explain it, but we all have the imputed sin of Adam and we're all in need of the imputed righteousness of Christ! That sweet little 2-year-old that all the sudden starts saying "mine!" and biting other children didn't have to be taught that because we all have a sin nature baked into our DNA!

b. We must recognize the reality that the more we live into the mission (individually, as a family, or church), we will experience a reciprocal level of opposition. That's the bad news. But the good news is that Jesus is faithful. He doesn't abandon us in the battle. He actively works on our behalf to strengthen and guard us, hence the call to prayer.

c. And who does He strengthen and guard us against?
the evil one.

d. We have an enemy, and the enemy isn't the person at work who believes differently from us. It isn't another student at school who bullies us. We must learn how to separate the evil that a person does from the identity of the person. It isn't that we don't hold people accountable for their actions, but we can't forget that sin originates from the evil one, Satan. We're in a spiritual battle and Jesus has committed to strengthen and guard us against the enemy in that battle!

e. Our responsibility isn't to change anyone or to even win the battle. We can't do that within ourselves. Our responsibility is to live out the Lord's commands, which only happens as we submit to the Holy Spirit. Our focus isn't on evil or our enemy but on God's love. And not just the abstract idea of God's love but on the reality that while I was a sinner, Christ died for me! Christ died for me!

2. Paul also challenges us to focus on the endurance of Christ. Jesus secured the supreme victory of God by way of the cross! Life comes from dying to self and we're called to pick up our cross and follow.

John 12:24-26 – 24 Truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains by itself. But if it dies, it produces much fruit. 25 The one who loves his life will lose it, and the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me. Where I am, there my servant also will be. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

B. In this challenging word that Paul gives the Thessalonians let's not lose sight that he's catching them doing something right! They are praying and practicing what they preach. Let's not discount words of affirmation. What we celebrate will eventually become the culture. That's in the home, in a church, or in the workplace. If we celebrate the touchdowns, homeruns, recitals, or A+'s, that will eventually become the driving culture. So along with the touchdowns, let's be sure to celebrate even more the character of the next generation and when we see the fruit of the Spirit evident in their lives.

C. Paul is rounding the turn to the finish line but there's still one last point needing to be addressed. It's a theme in both 1st and 2nd Thessalonians and it makes sense due to the eschatological focus of both letters. The Thessalonians were eager for Jesus to return. We should all be eager for the Lord to return, but in their eagerness some of the believers in Thessaloniki decided to go on an extended vacation at the expense of the community of faith.

There were two phenomena that intersected to make this the perfect storm.

1. One, early church history indicates that the 2nd Coming of Jesus was viewed as imminent. We should still hold this view as well, but the conclusion of some was to forgo the regular responsibilities of life such as a job.

2. Secondly, the early church was distinct from anything else in the ancient world in that socioeconomic barriers had been pushed through for the first time. Different socioeconomic classes didn't mix, but in the church they did. So you had this End Times expectation along with different classes mixing together with an ethic of generosity. It was a large enough issue that Paul corrected this line of thinking on two separate occasions.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 – 6 Now we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from every brother or sister who is idle and does not live according to the tradition received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you should imitate us: We were not idle among you; 8 we did not eat anyone's food free of charge; instead, we labored and toiled, working night and day, so that we would not be a burden to any of you. 9 It is not that we don't have the right to support, but we did it to make ourselves an example to you so that you would imitate us. 10 In fact, when we were with you, this is what we commanded you: "If anyone isn't willing to work, he should not eat." 11 For we hear that there are some among you who are idle. They are not busy but busybodies. 12 Now we command and exhort such people by the Lord Jesus Christ to work quietly and provide for themselves. 13 But as for you, brothers and sister, do not grow weary in doing good. 14 If anyone does not obey our instruction in the letter, take note of that person; don't associate with him, so that he may be ashamed. 15 Yet don't consider him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

3. Paul is using some very strong language here but he's not trying to be punitive. He's trying to be restorative and shake people's false thinking. Paul gives his example as an apostle to illustrate that even as the head leader of the church, he still didn't take advantage of the community's generosity for his own benefit. He

had the right to request support, but he wanted to set such a clear example that he chose to make tents while he preached the gospel.

4. Paul reminds them again of his example, then he briefly states both the negative implication of a poor work ethic and the positive side of a strong work ethic. I would sum up Paul's passion like this:

Daily decisions compound into our life's legacy!

a. What is Paul getting at when he instructs people to "work quietly and provide for yourself." One of the most profound ways we represent Jesus is through consistency and following through on our commitments. Could you imagine if Christ followers were known in our culture for people who simply showed up on time, worked hard, and didn't complain? This could change our entire culture if Christians would simply be willing to be people of their word and do what we say we're going to do. It's hard to live a quiet life and make excuses every day. Excuses require us to run our mouths. "I lost track of time." "I got into traffic or got caught by the train." The train didn't show up in Norfolk yesterday. Everybody knows about the train. Let's commit to plan ahead. There is a positive impact we can make for Jesus by doing the simple things well. We often discount the daily decisions we make to be people who follow through and work hard, and stay true to our commitments, but those are the daily decisions that compound into our life's legacy.

b. The negative impact when we forgo the responsibilities of life is immense when we consider that energy and time goes elsewhere. We need structure and when we don't have it, we tend to be: Busybodies.

c. Paul is employing paronomasia which is when one root word is used twice in proximity to indicate opposing ideas. We are designed to produce and to work. When we don't, we become what Paul calls a busybody. Someone who produces strife and what I call sideways energy because they have too much time on their hands. He's not talking about people with physical or mental impairments but people who are able-bodied and lazy.

5. We are to exercise church discipline over that person by foregoing fellowship with the intent they repent. In an honor- shame society like that of Thessaloniki, this would have been strong motivation for a person to repent and stop taking advantage of Christian generosity. Generosity isn't always clean, in fact, it can sometimes be a bit messy. But Paul reminds us to not grow weary of doing good. Don't get jaded just because some people take advantage. When in doubt, err on the side of generosity.

6. The adults of tomorrow are the youth of today. I don't want to harp on this too long, but we've got some room to grow in preparing the next generation for the realities of life. Work ethics are something that must be reinforced in the home. Rarely does a person just stumble into a work ethic; they are taught it in the home. The legal age for employment in Virginia is 14 years old. This is where I'm sitting on it, my children will either be in some type of extracurricular (sports, music, theatre) or they will have a j-o-b. Because those are two paths that will teach my children responsibility. Generally speaking, we are raising a significant number of youths today who have all the privileges they could want and little responsibility. We're damaging their mental and spiritual state. As a community of faith, we must learn to do better.

- D. Paul ends in a prayer which we've come to expect from Paul at this point. He saturates his letters from beginning to end with prayer. He also wants those in Thessaloniki to know that he is writing the letter. He's authenticating it with his own hands.

2 Thessalonians 3:16-18 – 16 May the Lord of peace himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord be with all of you. 17 I, Paul, am writing this greeting with my own hand, which is an authenticating mark in every letter; this is how I write. 18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

1. We've covered a lot of ground in Thessalonians, but the peace of God has never been far removed from Paul's thoughts. Peace amid persecution is hard for us to fathom but we also know peace doesn't come from a settled and secure life. The more we attempt to derive peace from our external situations the more we see those attempts as futile. We're great at manufacturing "things" in our culture but peace cannot be manufactured because it is a gift of God that comes from the pursuit of Jesus. If you'd like to know peace today, get to know the Author and Sustainer of life. He knows you and desires a relationship with you more than you could ever imagine. The best part is He knows where you are broken, He knows your fears, your hopes, He knows it all and His call is simple: You, come follow Me. He in return gives us the gift of His peace. The holistic, all-encompassing care of the One who created and sustains it all.