

TUTORIAL
3.27

Focus on Christ

In this tutorial, Bible presenter Scot Keen concludes our study on 2 Thessalonians and also on the module as a whole. We find that Paul leaves the Thessalonians with a resounding call to persevere and also an intriguing command to not be lazy.

Introduction

This tutorial brings us to the end of our study on 2 Thessalonians and also on this module as a whole. We have been talking about living in God's narrative. So let's look now at 2 Thessalonians chapter three.

Request for Prayer

Paul exhorts the believers to keep going by focusing on Christ. In 2 Thessalonians chapter three, Paul gives a prayer request. He says, “Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you.”

Now it is interesting that Paul is giving this prayer request and he is praying specifically that God's Word would spread, in other words not be inhibited, and that it would be glorified. We see in Acts chapter thirteen that God's Word is glorified when it is believed to be what it truly is, the Word of God. And so Paul is praying that the Word of God would spread and that it would be recognised for what it is, in the same way as it was in Thessalonica.

Paul also asked for prayer that he would, “Be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith.” He is saying, in essence, that not everybody is a believer. Now this is an interesting prayer request because it shows us that Paul believed that his ministry could be furthered by the ministry of the Thessalonians in prayer. They could be part of the church plant in Corinth, which was where Paul was when he wrote this. They could be part of that church plant by praying for Paul right where they were.

This should motivate us to pray for the church plants that we are aware of and, in doing so, pray that God's word would have its way in the hearts of men. When you look at Paul's prayer request, he doesn't ask for prayer for material things. He is not praying about health or situations like that, not that they are

bad things to pray about. But it shows that Paul's heart was focused on the advance of the Gospel and the building up of believers in the faith.

What is amazing about this is that when Paul wrote this, he faced a lot of opposition (Acts 18). And while he was there facing that opposition, the Lord appeared to him, telling him not to be afraid but to keep speaking. And God kept him there for eighteen months. Now could it be that God answered the prayer of the Thessalonian believers on Paul's behalf, and that was part of Paul's success in ministry in Corinth? I believe it was.

Paul says, "Not all have faith," which is another way of saying that some people are unbelievers. But then he uses a play on words and says, "But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one." Paul wants the believers to know that God is faithful, that He will continue to be involved in their lives and that He will strengthen them and protect them from the evil one.

Now we come to Paul's statement of confidence about the believers. He says in verse four, "We have confidence in the Lord concerning you." I'm constantly amazed and appreciative of the language of Scripture. Paul is so specific in his wording. He is confident in the Lord about them. And specifically, he is confident in the Lord concerning them that they are doing and will continue to do what Paul commanded.

Let's elaborate on this briefly. When Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, he did not seem to have the confidence that they were doing and continuing to do what he commanded. He was afraid that the tempter had tempted them, and his labor would be in vain. Well, Paul does not show that same concern in 2 Thessalonians. Now Paul is confident in the Lord concerning them that they are doing and continuing to do what he commanded. And the reason Paul had this confidence is because he had seen their obedience to the Word long enough to see a track record, to see a trajectory.

And yet, even then, Paul's confidence was ultimately in the Lord, but it was about them. And the idea here is that he was confident that they would keep walking with God, but his confidence was in God to make this happen, not necessarily in them. And this is not a blanket promise that he knows that there is nothing they could ever do to mess up, but it shows that he believes they are on the right trajectory. They are responding to the Word of God, and he trusts and knows that God will continue to be faithful, so he has every reason to be confident that they will keep maturing in the Lord and walking the path that God has for them.

Exhortation to persevere

Now Paul gives what I call the climactic exhortation to persevere. Remembering back to chapter one of 1 Thessalonians, Paul said, "Keep going. You had a great start. You turned to God from idols. You had work of faith,

labour of love, perseverance of hope. You were an example to everybody else. Keep going. You had a great start.” In chapter two Paul said, “Keep going. We are credible messengers and everything we did was so that you would walk worthy of God.” In chapter three, Paul said, “Keep going in order to be blameless before Christ at his coming. May God cause you to abound in love so that you will be blameless before Christ.” And so, keep moving ahead. Then in chapter four, he says, “We urge you excel still the more in your life. Watch out for sexual immorality. Don't be confused about what happens when believers die. Keep going.” In chapter five Paul says, “Keep going because God has not destined us for the day of the Lord or for wrath, he's destined us for salvation. You have this hope, this helmet of salvation. Respect your church leadership. Listen to prophetic utterances and keep going.”

Now we move on to 2 Thessalonians. In chapter one Paul says, “Keep going because we're not going to suffer forever. Christ comes back, and it will be wrath for them but rest for us.” Then in chapter two, “Keep going because God has different plans for us than he has for the unsaved world.” And now in chapter three Paul comes to a climactic exhortation. He says, “May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God” (2 Thessalonians 3:5). And this is a beautiful image.

The picture that comes to my mind is of my son when he was a year old. He would stand in the glass doorway and he would watch for me to come home from work. And it was so funny because I could see him long before his little eyes could focus on me. And I would be walking towards the house and all of a sudden, I could see his look changed and he would get all excited and start shaking his fists. He was so glad to see his dad. He directed his gaze onto me and it changed his demeanour.

And Paul is praying that God would direct our hearts into the love of God. The idea is that we are so prone to be performance driven, to labor to earn God's love and to think of it in the wrong terms that Paul is praying that the believers that God would turn their attention towards God's perfect love. When God turns our attention towards His love in the midst of suffering, it has a way of bringing deep peace to us. We know that even though we are being persecuted, God loves us and has our best interests at heart. So may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God. And then, look at this, into the steadfastness of Christ.

In Greek this translates to, “May God direct your hearts into the perseverance of Christ.” And what we need to know when we are being challenged to persevere is that God loves us. Then we need to lift up our eyes towards the One who himself persevered, who endured the cross, despised the shame and sat down at the right hand of God. We look to Jesus and that is what sustains us in the difficult times. And so Paul is praying that God would turn their attention toward the love of God and towards Christ's perfect example of

perseverance. We can be encouraged to be faithful knowing that one day we too, will be in the presence of the Lord.

Correcting the lazy

Now Paul gives a correction for those in the church who are lazy. He deals with some problems here as he wraps up the letter. I mentioned in a previous tutorial that when Paul was present among the church in Thessalonica, he saw a problem with their work ethic. He addressed that in 1 Thessalonians. By this point, it has grown into an epidemic and Paul has to deal with it, “We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us” (2 Thessalonians 3:6).

Paul is telling the believers to separate fellowship from other believers who are walking out of God's will. And then, he lets us know what that problem is in verse seven, “You yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it.” So evidently, even though Paul could have used his apostolic authority to receive finances from the Thessalonians, he refrained from doing so because he wanted to set an example. Perhaps Paul had early on already detected the potential, or even the actual problem, that was there.

And so Paul says, “With labour and hardship we kept working night and day so we would not be a burden to any of you.” Paul paid for his own ministry expenses in order to be an example. Look at verse ten, “When we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.” And so, we could be fooled in thinking the Thessalonians had love feasts and communal meals as believers. But when Paul was there, he would notice that the same ones would come to the feasts. They would not contribute to this meal. They were taking from other people but never giving. And Paul recognised that it was not because they could not work but rather because they refused to work. Paul realised this was a problem and he addressed it even during the initial church plant. He said they should not eat if they are not willing to work.

Pauls adds, “We hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies” (2 Thessalonians 3:11). This is appalling to me. Out of all the people on the face of this earth who have a purpose in life, it is believers. The last people who should be aimless in their lives and going around as busybodies are believers. We know why we exist: to live in God's narrative. We exist to take the Gospel Message to the nations. We exist to see believers built up in the faith and, though not everyone goes to do that, those who don't go should be working with their hands in order to have something to give to those in need. They should be reaching out in their own communities and building up believers in their own local churches.

And so, Paul was bothered by the fact that they were busybodies. He says, "Such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread." How would the Message get across? Someone would have carried this letter to Thessalonica and would read it publicly to the assembly there. Imagine being the undisciplined person sitting in the congregation, hoping for somewhere to hide when these words were read, "Such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread." But for those who are being faithful, Paul says, "But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good."

It goes without saying that working in a benevolent ministry, where you are trying to care for those who are in need, lends itself to being taken advantage of. So Paul said, "Do not grow weary in doing good." Correct the problem, yes, but don't stop doing good. And he also says, "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter (meaning to get a job and to work with their hands) take special note of that person and do not associate with them so that he would be put to shame." This was a shame culture, after all, and church discipline involved shaming the person into seeing the gravity of their wrong choices so they would function in a healthy way in the body.

Some people feel this was severe church discipline, but realise Paul had addressed this problem several times already, first when he was planting the church and then again in 1 Thessalonians, and so far they have not responded. Now it is time for corporate action and so he says to for the church to disassociate with these people, but he also adds that they are not to be regarded as enemies but admonished as brothers. This correction is done because they are fellow believers in the Lord and the goal is for them to be restored to a healthy walk with God. And so the church discipline is not punishment but an act of loving correction. And that was Paul's intent.

A conclusion

Well, Paul concludes in verses sixteen to eighteen, "Now may the Lord of peace himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!" And as I mentioned in the last tutorial, Paul gives his personal signature so that no one could copy his letters again. "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand" (1 Thessalonians 3:17). This is a distinguishing mark in every letter. This is the way he writes. Paul wants to be very clear on this. And then he concludes by saying, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all."

Now just a few quick comments to wrap up this study about living in God's narrative. We started in Romans chapter one. We have ended in 2 Thessalonians chapter three. During this time period in history, God is visiting the nations with the Gospel. He has turned to the Gentiles, as we saw in the book of Romans. And we have this Gospel Message: people are justified by

faith in Christ and sanctified through the Message that we are dead to sin and alive to God. We are secure in Christ. This is the teaching that we need to be preaching in local churches.

We learnt in Romans chapters nine through eleven that God has turned his attention towards the nations but will one day focus back on the Jewish people and fulfil the promises he made them. Then in Romans chapters twelve to sixteen, we found God desires for us to be living sacrifices, to submit to human government, to function with our gifts in the body of Christ, to live in unity together with one another and to be faithful with what he has entrusted to us. He will establish us in the faith.

We also discussed in 1 and 2 Thessalonians that as believers, we are secure in our salvation and so salvation is not at stake. But we are responsible to keep walking with God and to keep moving ahead with our growth in Him. And one of the key factors in that perseverance is hope. And 1 and 2 Thessalonians keep that hope in front of us.

My prayer and challenge for you is that you would live in light of God's narrative, believing and obeying the Word of God, knowing that one day God will accomplish His plan, as is hinted in the book of Romans and 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Thank you so much for being a part of this study.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Focus on Christ

1. What major problem did Paul deal with in 2nd Thessalonians 3?
2. Have you ever seen church discipline practiced? How was the issue dealt with?