

Paul's Love, Pride, and Concern (1 Thess 2:17—3:13)

In 2:1–12, Paul's concern is that the Thessalonians have a proper understanding of his motives and behavior when he was with them. The points he made about his own purity of motive, integrity, courage, and affection for them was not only in service of defending his honor, but also to supply a righteous example for them. In 2:17—3:10, Paul continues with this concern, but here the focus is on what happened *after* Paul left Thessalonica. They were not only beloved to him when he was in their presence, but also in absence. This section is concluded with a “prayer-wish,” where Paul expresses his concern for their well-being and their maturity before God and especially in view of the impending return of the Lord Jesus (3:11–13).

Paul's Longing for the Thessalonians (2:17–20)

¹⁷But, as for us, my dear brothers and sisters, when we were separated from you for a time, in person not in our hearts, we longed more deeply and with great affection to see you in person. ¹⁸For we wanted to visit you—I, Paul, tried again and again—but Satan blocked our way. ¹⁹For who is our hope, our joy, our crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus when he comes, if not you? ²⁰Yes, you are our glory and joy!

According to Acts, Paul and Silas fled from Thessalonica to Berea to avoid the hostility and persecution of the agitated Thessalonian citizens and city officials (Acts 17:8–10). Paul may be referring to this same situation when he mentions being separated from the Thessalonians for a time (2:17). The word separated (*aporphanizō*) bears the kind of image of being torn away from one's parents and, thus, to be *orphaned* (in fact, we get our word “orphan” from this Greek word).¹ Given how much Paul uses kinship language in this letter, the idea that Paul thought of the Thessalonians as family members fits well into his wider argument that he was just as ill-affected by

1. Note the NRSV: “We were made orphans by being separated from you” (2:17a).

his unscheduled departure as they were.² But, though he had to leave, they were always on his mind and he was eager to pay them another visit.

Paul admits that he attempted to see them on several occasions, but Satan blocked the way (2:18).³ What does Paul mean by this? Did Satan literally appear and stand in his way? Or is this an interpretive statement, viewing an obstacle (e.g., the equivalent of a flat tire or cancelled flight) as the work of a hostile power threatening his ministry? Given a text like 2 Cor 12:7–8 where Paul was given a “thorn in the flesh” as a messenger from Satan, and the thorn was probably either a physical ailment or the problem of his own persecutors, one could see how the Apostle could interpret various hindrances to visiting the Thessalonians as schemes of Satan (see 2 Cor 2:11; Eph 6:16; cf. 1 Pet 5:8).⁴ In any case, the wider point is obvious—if there is any suspicion or blame for Paul’s distance from the Thessalonians, it should fall squarely on the real enemy, Satan, God’s adversary (Rom 16:20; Cf. 1 Tim 5:15).⁵

Paul intends to make his relationship with the Thessalonians as clear as possible. He has shown that he cares for them deeply (see 2:1–12). Here he also acknowledges that they are his “pride and joy,” so to speak.⁶ He takes “joy” in them because he recognizes their work, labor, and endurance (see 1:3) and he especially values their trust in God.

What does it mean that they are his “hope”? Paul mentions the coming of the Lord Jesus here. At that future moment, a great light will shine on all people and all history, exposing everything that was hidden (1 Cor 4:5). When it comes to Paul, it seems to be that he will be examined in some way

2. See Burke 2003: 157–62. Burke underscores that this language puts the emphasis, not on Paul’s power as apostle or father, but as one who is *vulnerable*, “perhaps in order to identify with his own converts’ sense of vulnerability, not to mention their social and familial isolation experienced upon turning ‘from idols to serve the living and true God’” (1:9; see 2003: 162).

3. Gregory A. Boyd offers a brief, but insightful discussion of Satan according to the New Testament; see Boyd 2001: 38–39.

4. For a succinct and insightful discussion of 2 Cor 12:7–8, see Guthrie 2015: 590–92.

5. See Malherbe 2000: 184.

6. St. John Chrysostom compares this language of pride to that of a parent: “Observe then the words, which are those of women, inflamed with tenderness, talking to their little children.” But Chrysostom is quick to add about Paul’s remarks in 2:19, “Of what fiery warmth is this! Never could either mother, or father, yea if they even met together, and commingled their love, have shown their own affection to be equivalent to that of Paul” (*Homilies on 1 Thessalonians* III.335); see <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230403.htm>.

based on the fruitfulness of his ministry (see Rom 15:16). He can claim a “hope” and “crown of boasting” based on churches such as the Thessalonians,⁷ because his ministry had such an effective impact on them and they responded appropriately to the good news of Messiah Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁷ It may seem strange to us that Paul writes positively about “boasting.” Certainly he does occasionally condemn inappropriate self-centered boasting (for example, see 2 Cor 10:17). But that does not preclude a noble kind of “pride” that recognizes the work of God in one’s life and ministry.⁸ Paul mentions to the Philippians that the maturity of their faith on the “day of the Messiah” will prove that “I [Paul] did not run in vain or labor in vain” (Phil 2:16). Thus, he can boast in his converts as fruit of God’s work through him (see 1 Cor 15:31; 2 Cor 7:4).⁹ The Thessalonians are Paul’s own “glory” because he beams with pride on account of their firm commitment to Messiah Jesus, all of which is a demonstration of the grace and power of God. N. T. Wright offers an apt reflection on how this attitude can nourish and inspire all believers today.

Each of us has our own work of love to perform, whether it be quiet and secret or well known and public. Each pastor and teacher should look to the future, and see those in their charge as their potential joy, hope, and crown. And each congregation should recognize that this is how they will appear on the last day. Both should be challenged and encouraged, by this forward look, to learn and live the faith, to celebrate the hope, to consolidate and practise the love revealed in the gospel.¹⁰

7. Malherbe 2000: 185; Wanamaker 1990: 123. James W. Thompson offers an excellent discussion of this subject: “In every instances in which Paul declares his pastoral ambition, he indicates that the success or failure of his work will be determined only at the end, when he will either ‘boast’ of his work or realize that his work has been in vain. The eschatological horizon is a central feature of Paul’s pastoral ambition. . . . [T]he ultimate test of his ministry is the outcome of his work with the churches, the ultimate goal defines his ministry in the present.” See 2006: 22; generally 31–60.

8. A text like Gal 6:4 gives the impression that a good sense of pride has its place where one can be proud of oneself for a job well done, but a line is crossed when the matter turns into a contest or “us” vs. “them” rally.

9. A helpful place to turn for discussion regarding the relationship between justification by faith and judgment according to deeds is the recently published *Four Views on the Role of Works at the Final Judgment* with Robert N. Wilkin, Thomas Schreiner, James D. G. Dunn, and Michael Barber as contributors (ed. A. Stanley, 2013).

10. Wright 2004: 107.

The Thessalonians' Good News of Perseverance (3:1–10)

¹Therefore, when we could no longer bear it, we thought it best to stay behind in Athens, ²and we sent Timothy, our brother and coworker for God in the good news of the Messiah. We sent him to strengthen you and to encourage your loyalty, ³so that no one is shaken up by these afflictions. For you know for yourselves that this was inevitable. ⁴When we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted—and so it came to pass as you know. ⁵So then, when it became impossible for me to bear, I sent Timothy to learn about your loyalty, fearing that the tempter may have tempted you, and all our toil wasted.

⁶But now Timothy has come back to us from visiting you and has announced to us the “good news” of your loyalty and love, and that you always carry fond memories of us. He told us how you long to see us just as we long to see you. ⁷So we were comforted about you, my dear brothers and sisters, in all of our distress and suffering since we were reassured about your loyalty. ⁸For now we feel alive again, knowing you stand firm in the Lord. ⁹In what way can we thank God in return for you, for all the joy we feel in the presence of God because of you? ¹⁰Night and day we pray fervently that we may see your faces so that we may meet the needs of your loyalty.

Starting in chapter three, Paul narrates his concern for the Thessalonians while he was in Athens (3:1–12). Timothy, Paul's close companion and co-worker (see 1:1), was sent to check in on the Thessalonians and to strengthen and comfort them during a difficult time (3:2).¹¹ He carried out an important pastoral task, namely, “helping them both to understand and to live out what it means to be members of God's people.”¹² Almost as an aside, Paul reminds them that they were forewarned that true followers of Jesus are bound to face persecution (3:3b). Paul communicates something quite similar to the Philippians: “For he has graciously granted to you the privilege not only of believing in him [Jesus], but of suffering for him as well” (1:29; cf. Rom 8:17). Believers inevitably will suffer for their allegiance to Jesus as Lord, not because God relishes in suffering, but because the

11. Todd Still wonders whether the reason Timothy was the right choice for this ministry was because he “was not ‘front and center’ during the founding visit and as a result would not be on the ‘radar screen’ of non-Christian opposition.” See Still 2011: 30–45, at 33.

12. Holmes 1998: 97–98.

Messiah's kingdom operates in direct opposition to the sinful way of the world—his subjects must maintain a distinctly counter-cultural existence imitating the radically backwards values of holiness as well as self-giving love towards neighbor and God.

Paul offered this reminder about the inevitability of Christian suffering because he feared that, in his absence, their faith and loyalty would be shaken (3:3). According to J. P. Louw and Eugene Nida, the verb that Paul uses here for “shaken,” *sainomai*, can be defined as “to be so emotionally disturbed as to give up one's belief.”¹³ The pressures and pushback the Thessalonians were receiving from their neighbors created cognitive and social pressure that, if not dealt with, could lead to a kind of world-view collapse (see Introduction, 2–3).¹⁴ One way that Paul could manage to avoid this implosion was to warn and prepare believers. However, when push comes to shove (perhaps literally in this case), training can fail. How many soldiers, having theoretically “trained for war,” have retreated when things get overwhelming on the real battlefield?

Paul was afraid that the Tempter may have succeeded in undermining their confidence and hope (3:5b). Clearly the “Tempter” is Satan who makes it a habit of preying on the weak (1 Cor 7:5). But the New Testament is quite emphatic that, while the Tempter sees it as his business to tempt, he has no power to control the human will.¹⁵ His role is to distract and confuse, and to promote fear and doubt. One wonders whether the situation of the Thessalonians might have been similar to that of the Smyrnian church (of a later time): “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you in prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev 2:10). As we learn here, the Evil One tests (or tempts) to push people to their breaking point. Revelation encourages the Smyrnians to endure even if it means martyrdom. We do not know what the Thessalonians were facing, but Paul offered critical advice—*keep pressing on*. The subtext of 1 Thess 3:3–4 is that Paul could forewarn and prepare the Thessalonians about suffering and trials precisely because God has all things in hand and such set-backs and challenges cannot thwart his

13. L-N 31.66.

14. See also Gaventa 1998: 42.

15. St. Thomas Aquinas reinforces this point: “To tempt is properly speaking to make trial of something. . . . A demon cannot change the will. . . . [This] cannot be forced; it can be inclined.” See *Summa Theologiae* 1, qu. 114, art. 2, as cited in Thiselton 2011: 87.

redemptive purposes. God intends not just to work *in spite of* problems, but especially *through* problems as the faith of believers is strengthened by trials¹⁶—so much so that Paul could write to the Romans that believers can *boast* in their troubles and afflictions because God uses these things to produce godly character (see Rom 5:3–4).

Paul recounts how Timothy returned to him with news that the Thessalonians were, in fact, enduring (3:6). Quite noticeably in the Greek text, Paul uses the word *euangelizomai*, a verb he employs almost exclusively for “preaching the good news.” The verb *euangelizomai* appears about twenty times in his letters in the New Testament, but only *here* does he use it in reference to something *other than* the good news of Messiah Jesus (the message of salvation). It has, in a sense, a mundane meaning in 1 Thess 3:6: Timothy shared the *pleasing message* (or *happy news*) of the Thessalonians’ perseverance. However, because Paul tends to use language of “good news” for the gospel of Messiah Jesus (i.e., as a sort of technical term), one cannot help but draw that nuance into 1 Thess 3:6 as well. Timothy sharing a *pleasing message* about the Thessalonians is part of the ongoing work of the *sharing of the gospel* because it is the same Spirit that inspires their endurance and the same Messiah Jesus that models and guides their love. It is a beautiful thing for Paul’s converts to be responsible for the “good news” to be preached *to Paul* on account of their faithfulness and obedience!

Paul is relieved and pleased to hear from Timothy that, not only have the Thessalonians been enduring, but they acknowledge and fondly remember Paul’s love for them and they want to see him just as much as he does them (3:6b). The language of longing (*epiptheō*) is the language of intimacy and close friendship. This is the same verb used in the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Ps 42:1: “As the deer *longs* (*epipotheō*) for the streams of water, my soul also for you, O God.” Paul and the Thessalonians have a deep, almost unquenchable thirst for being in fellowship together in one place.

Paul, Timothy, and Silas could find some comfort in their anxieties when they came to know of the Thessalonians’ *pistis*—a word normally translated “faith,” but here seems to refer to their faithfulness, loyalty, and confident hope in God through Jesus (3:7).¹⁷ Paul’s next statement could be rather shocking to some modern readers: “For now we feel alive again, knowing you stand firm in the Lord” (3:8; cf. 4:1). What does this mean?

16. See Jervis 2007: 15–36.

17. See Andy Johnson 2016.

There is a sense in which Paul receives vitality and life through the lives of his converts. Imagine parents whose college-age daughter goes off to Europe on spring break and they discover on the news that an airplane crashed after take-off from the airport where she departed. Until they know if it is their child's plane, their hearts stop and deep panic sets in. When they get the phone call from their daughter (who was safely on a different flight), what relief and joy! Given how much Paul and his companions invested in their churches, it is no wonder they became his lifeblood. F. F. Bruce's paraphrase of Paul's sentiment is especially eloquent and appropriate: "the news of your unwavering faith and love is the very breath of life to us."¹⁸ So filled to the brim with joy is Paul at this news that he could not possibly think of a big enough gift to give back to God for God's gift of the Thessalonians to him (3:9).

Once more we come to know of Paul's constant attentiveness to them in prayer ("night and day") in the hopes that he can be with them and "meet the needs of your loyalty" (3:10). It is unclear what Paul means by this, but we may have a clue by looking at similar language in Romans. In the opening chapter of Paul's letter to Rome, he communicates his intent to see the Roman believers in person, and to impart to them a spiritual gift to strengthen them (Rom 1:11). He clarifies: "that is, that we may be mutually comforted by one another's faith, both yours and mine" (Rom 1:12). Similarly, Paul wanted to be with the Thessalonians in their time of distress to give them comfort and encouragement. Perhaps this could happen through additional teaching, but one also imagines that simply catching up together as friends could offer a special consolation and refreshment (as we often see when friends visit loved ones in the hospital and simply provide good company).

Paul's Prayer-Wish (3:11–13)

¹¹Now may God our Father himself and Messiah Jesus our Lord guide us on a path to you. ¹²And may the Lord cause your love to abound and overflow both for each other and for all people in the way that we love you. ¹³So may he strengthen your hearts so that you may be blameless and holy before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

18. Bruce 1982: 67.

So moved is Paul by the hope of seeing the Thessalonians that he offers a doxological prayer: “Now may God our Father himself and Messiah Jesus our Lord guide us on a path to you” (3:11). This is the first of three prayer-wishes he expresses in 3:11–13. Firstly, he prays that both God and Jesus open a way to the Thessalonians. This is a rare, but important, glimpse into Paul’s Christology in terms of how he views the nature of Jesus himself. Scholars have long debated whether Paul placed Jesus into the category of “divine.” This is a complex topic, fraught with historical, theological, and methodological challenges, but the fact that Paul offers his prayer-wish *both* to God the Father *and* Jesus means that Jesus shares with God the Father the power to prepare his way and secure his footsteps.¹⁹

The second prayer-wish Paul offers (3:12) is focused on a desire for the Lord “to cause your love to abound and overflow both for each other and for all people in the way that we love you.” If we look ahead to 1 Thess 4:10, we see that Paul can affirm that there is no serious deficiency in their expression of communal love. He merely prays that they continue to push forward and not lose steam in this area, a temptation common to those under pressure and persecution.

In the third prayer-wish, Paul’s focus is on the Thessalonians’ character and standing at the return of the Lord Jesus (3:13). In particular, he prays for their holiness (*hagiosynē*) and purity (*amemptos*). This is judgment imagery, where their lives are placed under the divine microscope and Paul desires that they be able to stand proud and unashamed that they lived lives pleasing to God (see 4:1–3).²⁰

The mentioning of the “coming” or “appearance” (*parousia*) of Jesus is a special emphasis of 1 Thessalonians (2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; cf. 2 Thess 2:1, 8). It seems to have been a standard apostolic teaching (James 5:7–8; 2 Pet 1:16; 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28) and probably reaches back to the Jesus tradition (e.g., Matt 24:3, 27, 37, 39). The early Christians anticipated the return of the Lord Jesus with great excitement, but they knew that they too would face judgment and had to be fully prepared for the careful consideration of

19. See Fee 2007: 53–55.

20. See Matera 2012: 181–83. Morna Hooker notes that, while Paul does frequently refer to judgment of believers, he maintains confidence in the grace and justification of the Messiah. The references to the examination of the deeds of believers are not about damnation, but rather accountability; “God’s righteous people must be righteous, urged Paul, and that meant that they were required to live out the gospel. They had indeed been righted by God, but might still fall away. The Christian’s aim must always be to please the Lord” (Hooker 2008: 161).

their lives and deeds (see Rom 2:6; 2 Pet 3:10). Paul prays, in regards to the Thessalonians, not so that they may be fearful of the coming of Jesus, but rather that they may have confidence and assurance in view of blameless and obedient lives.

Fusing the Horizons: Life Together

“Join us for our fellowship hour after the service!” How many churches conclude their worship by welcoming visitors to have “fellowship” in the next room over coffee and donuts? The motivation behind this is obviously appropriate—many churches recognize how important it is that life in the church is about a community of relationships. However, I fear that by talking about this snack-enriched chatting hour as “fellowship,” we define it in a way that would be quite alien to Paul. We in the West generally use the language of fellowship as a way to refer to social gatherings. At its best, these gatherings give encouragement and promote upbuilding. But even with these good things in place, I am concerned that the essence of what *fellowship* is in the sense that the early Christians meant remains obscure for many congregations. The Greek word in the New Testament that is often translated as “fellowship” in English Bibles is *koinōnia*, and it literally means “commonness” or “shared-ness.” Because this word could be used as a technical term in Paul’s world for a business partnership or a marriage contract, one can get a sense for the idea of “shared-ness” associated with *koinōnia*.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul does not actually use the word *koinōnia* (though he uses it regularly in several of his other letters), but you can easily see the fingerprints of the meaning of *koinōnia* all over this letter and especially in 1 Thess 2:7—3:13. When two people or two groups agree to share life, then being apart is a heavy burden. Hence Paul has the deepest longing to see the Thessalonians, because they became so dear to him (2:17). They became his own hope and joy and glory (2:19–20). When Paul wondered about how adversity might affect the Thessalonian brothers and sisters, he could not stand the thought of their confusion or doubt (3:5). His attachment to the Thessalonian church was so strong that his own life itself was bound to their faith in the Lord—their loss would be his loss, their triumph and loyalty in the face of trials, a kind of resurrection from the dead for Paul himself (3:8).

Again, this vision differs from what I often see in our churches today, because I rarely see the sort of Christian unity that is determined by, what

Paul explains in Philippians, two people who share one soul and heartbeat (see Phil 1:27; 2:2). Christian fellowship and unity are not about agreement and encouragement—though such things are obviously important. Christian fellowship can begin with an hour at church, but must be defined by, to borrow a phrase from the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “life together.”

Bonhoeffer wrote the book *Life Together* to capture a proper Christian vision of fellowship. In this book, he reminds us that one reason why we have such a hard time understanding how Paul felt about the Thessalonians is because we are often spoiled by too many opportunities to know and have friendship and companionship with other believers. But there have been times and places in history where Christians have not had that luxury – even places around the world today. Here is what Bonhoeffer writes:

It is by God’s grace that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly around God’s word and sacrament in this world. Not all Christians partake of this grace. The imprisoned, the sick, the lonely who live in the diaspora, the proclaimers of the gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that visible community is grace.²¹

Bonhoeffer ponders why community is so important, and concludes that it is because we are *human*.

A human being is created as a body; the Son of God appeared on earth in the body for our sake and was raised in the body. In the sacrament the believer receives the Lord Christ in the body, and the resurrection of the dead will bring about the perfected community of God’s spiritual-physical creatures. Therefore, the believer praises the Creator, the Reconciler and the Redeemer, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the bodily presence of the other Christian. The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian living in the diaspora recognizes in the nearness of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God. In their loneliness, both the visitor and the one visited recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body. They receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility, and joy. They receive each other’s blessings as the blessing of the Lord Jesus Christ. But if there is so much happiness and joy even in a single encounter of one Christian with another, what inexhaustible

21. Bonhoeffer 2005: 28.

riches must invariably open up for those who by God's will are privileged to live in daily community life with other Christians!²²

Again, keeping in mind that some believers around the world are less fortunate and do not have the privilege of regular Christian fellowship, Bonhoeffer enjoins us who do have a church community to count our blessings.

Therefore, let those who until now have had the privilege of living a Christian life together with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of their hearts. Let them thank God on their knees and realize: it is grace, nothing but grace, that we are still permitted to live in the community of Christians today.²³

As Bonhoeffer suggests, we should cherish Christian fellowship when we see how people like Paul hungered and thirsted for the Thessalonians. We also should remind ourselves that Paul had this longing because he opened himself up to sharing *life together* with the Thessalonians. Fellowship, for Paul, was not an event, but a means of life itself. May we dare to entrust ourselves to our fellow believers and share our deepest selves (1 Thess 2:8) with our brothers and sisters such that they become life to us and we to them. And may we thank God that we can.

22. Ibid., 29.

23. Ibid., 30. In the same section of the book, Bonhoeffer quotes Martin Luther (one of his favorite theologians) who commented that church fellowship is one of the "roses and lilies" of the Christian life; see Ibid., 31.