

2:13 For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

2:14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews,

2:15 who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men,

2:16 hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.

“For this reason” points either to the reason for the thanksgiving or the subject of the thanksgiving. The reason Paul is thankful is because of how the gospel was received.

Verses 13 and 14 teach us a number of things about the gospel:

1. The gospel is revealed truth from God (“you accepted it . . . for what it really is, the word of God”).

In spite of the pressure of accommodating his message to the “modern thought-world” of his day, Paul preached the message God had given him (Morris, 87). . . because he believed it was truth. In verse 13 the Thessalonians accepted the message that Paul preached as originating from God.

2. Belief in the gospel is the work of God through the gospel (“the word of God. . . performs its work in you who believe”).

Paul thanked God for the Thessalonians’ reception of the gospel because he knew that the Spirit of God is the one behind their desire to believe. Any positive response to the gospel is due to *God’s work through the gospel*. To state it differently, whenever the gospel is received, God’s power is at work. In Romans 1:16 Paul calls the gospel the power of God.

3. True belief is faith that lasts.

Paul thanks God for their belief. “You who believe” at the end of verse 13 stresses the continued action of belief that follows the reception of the gospel. Continued belief is evidence that God is at work in us and that we are truly saved.

4. The gospel transforms lives (“you. . . became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus”).

The “for” in 2:14 introduces the proof that the gospel was at work in those who believed.

The effects of the gospel were experienced by the Thessalonians and were seen in their imitation of the churches in Judea (the original churches established by the apostles). Although the Thessalonians hadn’t observed or intentionally imitated the believers in Judea, they exhibited the same traits as the believers there. Both groups received the word of God in the midst of much opposition and endured hardships at the hands of their countrymen (2:14).

Mention of enduring suffering leads Paul into a severe denunciation of his fellow Jews (2:15–16).

First, he identifies them as those who killed the Lord Jesus. They killed the man who is the Lord; they killed the God-man. In Matthew 27:25 the Jews themselves accepted the responsibility for Christ's death as they cried out, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!"

Secondly, they killed the prophets (cf. Acts 7:52).

Thirdly, Paul says, "they *also* drove us out" (a comment that seems to put the OT prophets and the apostles on the same level). See Acts 17 for an historical account of what happened.

In sum, they displeased God. The present tense (in Greek) indicates a habitual pattern of not pleasing God. They were hostile toward God and men. The Jews didn't want the gospel and they didn't want the Gentiles to believe the gospel either.

As a result of their antagonism, the Jews were filling their sins up to the limit (2:16). The words, "fill up" were commonly used of a measure or a cup being filled. The idea is that the cup is partially empty but is rapidly filling to the brim. "Each fresh act of hostility to the gospel was an additional drop in their cup of guilt, which had been steadily filling during the ages" (Garrod, 79). The "words imply that there is a certain measure of wickedness which God will allow a nation, a group, or an individual to complete before His judgment falls on them. . . 'God delays the display of his wrath till offenders have reached a kind of saturation point, beyond which they may not pass'" (Hiebert, 119). Or, as Marshall says, "the fact is that there is a fixed measure or amount of sin to be committed in order to bring about judgment; it is like filling up one pan on an old fashioned pair of scales until eventually it counter balances the weight of the other pan and it begins to fall. . . 'Always' suggest a continuous action. Paul seems to be saying that the various hostile actions of the Jews which they are continually performing against the missionaries are all going to fill up the total number of their sins; in other words, the total is not yet complete" (Marshall, 80).

Matthew 23 sheds some light upon Paul's comment. In verses 29 and 30 Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'" The scribes and Pharisees saw themselves as morally and spiritually superior to their forefathers. They reasoned that if they were building monuments for the prophets they surely wouldn't have joined their forefathers in killing them. But Jesus saw an ironical twist to what they are saying. In verse 31 He said, "Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets." By acknowledging that they were sons of the murderers, Jesus saw them as admitting that they had the same traits as their fathers (like father like son). So in verse 32 He told them, "Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers." The forefathers had, through the killing of the OT prophets, begun to fill up the cup of guilt leading to God's wrath. When the cup is full, God's wrath would fall. Jesus told His contemporaries, "I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, so that upon you may fall the

guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth” (Matt. 23:34–35). In short, their guilt would be added to that of their forefathers and the limit of God’s mercy would run out.

In addition to the above verses, there are a number of verses that establish the principle that God fixes times of judgment based on the morality of a people. God intends to judge the Jews for their unbelief, but He is waiting for their sin to run its course. This concept is also found in Genesis 15:16 where God promised to judge the Amorites when their sins reached full measure. As Barnes notes in his commentary on Genesis, “From this simple sentence we have much to learn. (1) The Lord foreknows the moral character of people. (2) In His providence He administers the affairs of nations on the principle of moral rectitude. (3) Nations are spared until their iniquity is full. (4) They are then cut off in retributive justice.” Poole, in commenting on the same passage says, “All men’s sins are kept by God as in a book of remembrance, not one of them is lost; and as God exactly observes the number and measure of men’s sins, so he determines within himself how far and how long he will bear with sinful men or nations, and what shall be the period of his patience; and when that comes, their measure is full, and their destruction infallibly comes.” Also see Daniel 8:23 and the related thought in Revelation 6:11. In Romans 2:5–6 Paul says to each person, “. . . because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart *you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath* and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person according to his deeds.” Although this does not talk about sins reaching the point where judgement will fall, it tells us that each sin is being stored; it is being recorded and kept. Someday all our sins will be used as the evidence that will condemn us at the climatic eschatological outpouring of God’s wrath in the Day of Judgment.

According to 1 Thessalonians 1:10 God’s wrath is future, but in 2:16 it appears to be in the past. Paul’s statement, “wrath *has come* upon them to the utmost” is an aorist tense, which most commonly is a past action. However, it could mean one of two things: (1) God’s judgment has fallen on them and they now experience it, or (2) it hangs over them and it is just about to fall on them. If the former is in view, it would fit the historical time frame. Jesus died and rose around 32 AD. 1 Thessalonians was written around 50AD. Between those dates there was an unprecedented famine in Judea (between 45 and 47AD) and the brutal massacre of the Jews in the temple precincts at Passover (49AD). In the same year there was the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by the Emperor Claudius. Thus, “wrath has come upon them” and they are still experiencing its results. Others see Paul as saying that the wrath of God is hanging over their heads. They take “has come” to mean “it has drawn near even to the very point of contact... so the sentence could be that the divine wrath has drawn very near to the Jews and will follow up on them once the measure of their sins is complete ” (Marshall, 81). Some in this camp see Paul’s prediction as being fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD (20 years from the writing of the letter). This was the most catastrophic judgment that any Jew living at that time would experience. Others see Paul as referring to the eschatological judgment still to come. Regardless of the view one holds, the point still remains that God will judge (or has judged) the Jews for their unbelief once their sin has run its course.

“The divine wrath is operative in the world as God gives up sinners to further acts of sin for which they will experience is coming judgment (Ro. 1:18–2:11). It has been suggested that here too Paul sees God’s

wrath already at work in the hardening of the hearts of the Jews to commit further acts of hostility to the gospel and to reject it” (Marshall, 81).

(See Stott 57–58 for the hateful response of the church toward the Jews in the early years of Christian history).

When we look at these verses we need to remember that Paul himself was a patriotic Jew. In Romans 3:1–4 and 9:1–11:36 he gloried in his Jewish ancestry. He longed for the salvation of his people. He was willing to forfeit his own salvation if they might be saved. He taught that God had not cast off his people, because the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. Metaphorically speaking, he said God would graft the Jews back into the tree though they are temporarily cut off (Stott). Thus, although Paul was harsh, he was not motivated by hatred; rather, he was appalled at antagonism of the people whom God had set apart to be His own.

Furthermore, Paul didn’t believe that every Jew would be judged. This is obvious because after he left Corinth he went to Ephesus and continued his policy of evangelizing in the synagogue first. He continued to believe that the gospel was for the Jew first, and also for the Greek (Ro. 1:16).

2:17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while-- in person, not in spirit-- were all the more eager with great desire to see your face.

2:18 For we wanted to come to you-- I, Paul, more than once-- and yet Satan hindered us.

2:19 For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?

2:20 For you are our glory and joy.

The “but” (*de—δέ*) of verse 17 moves Paul from the subject of the Jews’ hostility back to his own experience. It contrasts him to the Jews. It may better be rendered “now” (Hiebert, 122). It is almost as if Paul is saying, “OK, back to what I was saying about our experience among you.”

These verses are loaded with emotion.

- Paul calls the believers “brothers”—members of his family. He has already likened his relationship to them to that of a mother (2:7) and father (2:11).
- He expresses his separation from them as being “orphaned” (translated as “taken away”). In Greek, this word was used of children deprived of parents, parents deprived of children, or the forceful and painful separation of friends. The addition of “from you” intensifies the idea of being torn away *from them*.
- Even though he was physically absent, Paul insists that his heart had never left them (he was with them in spirit).
- He was eager to see them. But more than that, Paul adds he was eager *with desire*. “Desire” in Greek, is most commonly used in negative contexts and is translated as “lust.” Here Paul uses the original sense of the word, meaning “a fierce passion.” But even this strong word for “desire” was not strong enough to express how he felt, so he throws in the word “great.”: he

was not just eager to see them; nor was he eager just to see them with desire; he was eager to see them with a *great* desire.

- He hadn't just thought about seeing them once; he wanted to go to them more than once (2:18).
- Lastly, he calls them his hope, joy, and crown of exultation.

Needless to say, Paul pulls all the plugs in expressing his love for them.

In verse 18 Paul says that Satan hindered the missionary band from returning to Thessalonica. The verb translated as “hindered” literally means “to cut into” and was a military term used of cutting up (destroying) a road to make it impassable. It was also used to denote a hindrance or obstacle that prevented the accomplishment of an intended movement (Hiebert, 127).

Satan can, and often does use human instruments to hinder the efforts of Christians. However, in Acts 16:6–7 Paul recognized that God also closes doors that prevented him from traveling. In 1 Thessalonians 3, he was able to distinguish the source as satanic.

“Who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation?” in verse 19 is a rhetorical question. It is clear that Paul is thinking of a future day in which the missionaries’ joy and hope will be realized when their beloved converts are glorified with them (Hiebert).

“Our crown” refers to a victor’s crown (a garland). The crown is figurative (it is called a “crown of glorying” or “crown of exultation”), picturing the reward received by the missionaries for their labors. Believers from Thessalonica will be present at Christ’s return, and their presence will testify of the work that God accomplished through Paul and the others. This will give Paul reason to boast in what God has done. The Thessalonians’ faith was proof that Paul had fulfilled his calling. Paul’s ministry has its ultimate meaning at the end of the age.

The word rendered as “coming” is *parousia* (παρουσία) and originally meant “presence” (Phil. 2:12) or “arrival.” However, this gave rise to the sense of “coming to be present.” The term could be used in everyday life to describe someone’s arrival (1 Cor. 16:17; 2 Cor. 7:6; Phil. 1:26, etc.), but it was also the usual word to speak of the arrival of a great personage (or god) or a royal visit (especially of the emperor). In the NT it became a technical term of the second coming of Christ (1 Thess. 3:13; 4:15; 5:32; 2 Thess. 2:1; Ja. 5:7, 8; 2 Pet. 1:16; 3:4, 12; 1 Jn. 2:28). Depending on the context, Christ’s *parousia* could refer to the time of His arrival, or stress His continued presence with His people after His arrival. When Christ comes, He will judge the world (Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 2 Thess. 2:8; Isa. 2:10–12; Amos 5:17–18) and bring salvation to those who trust in Him. In that day, His followers (the Thessalonians in this context) would be honored participants in the public manifestation of Christ.

3:1 Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone,

3:2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith,

3:3 so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.

Some want to see a contradiction between the movements of the missionaries in the Book of Acts and Paul's comment in 1 Thessalonians 3:1. In Acts 17:14 Paul went to Athens alone, leaving Timothy and Silas at Berea. From Athens he sent for them (Acts 17:15) and then preached the gospel to the Athenians. He then journeyed to Corinth (Acts 18:1) where Silas and Timothy joined him from their travels in Macedonia (Acts 18:5). However, according to 1 Thessalonians 3:1 *Timothy was with Paul in Athens*. The easiest resolution to the apparent problem is simply that the writer of Acts didn't include the trip of Timothy from Athens to Thessalonica since it didn't serve any purpose (Morris, 98).

According to verse 2, Timothy's purpose in leaving was to strengthen and encourage the church in their faith. This is further explained in verse 3: "so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this."

The verb translated as "be disturbed" (σαίνεσθαι) in verse 3 has the meaning of "to sway"; for example, it was used of a wagging tail of a dog. It came to mean "to move back and forth." Perhaps Jews were attempting to sway them into accepting Judaism, which of course, would end their persecution as well.

But Paul maintains that troubles are our lot; that is, they are a portion that God allots to us. They are appointed to us. The verb "destined" is a strong one that gives the impression of something that cannot be altered. As Peter said, "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you" (1 Pet. 4:12). Hebrews 11:36–37 says that believers "experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated . . ." Suffering is the very process of living out the Christian life and should not be viewed as something strange or alien.

In verses 1–5 "Paul not only wants to be with them, he wants to be with them for their good. And that is a demonstration of elementary Christianity. Christ Jesus came to us, choosing to be with us – and this for our good. He chose the path of self-denial, dying in excruciating shame and degradation so that others may live. He calls us to serve the same way . . ." (Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 84).

3:4 For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know.

3:5 For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.

In verse 3 Paul had said to the Thessalonians that they themselves knew that Christians have been destined to afflictions. In verse 4 he reminds them that he had warned them of this. Yet, this was also the reason why Paul feared for them.

The reference to the activity of the tempter should not be overlooked. Satan is referred to in every major division of the New Testament. He is supreme in the realm of evil spirits (Eph. 2:2; 2

Thess. 2:9). His activities are always opposed to God and to man's best interests. Afflictions like sickness are often spoken of as due to the activity of his minions, and Paul's "stake in the flesh" is described as "a messenger of Satan to buffet me" (2 Cor. 12:7). His activities in the realm of the spirit are seen in the taking away the good seed from the heart of man (Mk.4:15), and sowing evil people in the world (Matt. 13:39). As "the god of this world" he blinds the minds of the unbelieving (2 Cor. 4:4). He tempted our Lord (Matt 4. Lk. 4) and tempts His followers (Lk. 22:3). He hindered Paul's missionary work (1 Thess. 2:18). He sought to gain an advantage over the faithful (2 Cor. 2:11). Had he been successful in his fell work among the Thessalonians Paul's hard work would have been rendered futile. Yet he is not conceived of dualistically, as commensurate with God. He is surely the chief among the enemies to be subjugated at the end (1 Cor. 15:25). Yea, he has been defeated already (Col. 2:15). Christians here and now may defeat his purposes (Eph. 6:16) (Morris, 104).

3:6 But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you,

3:7 for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith;

3:8 for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord.

Prior to 3:6 Paul had been speaking about his previous concerns. But Timothy had returned from visiting the Thessalonians with good news about their faith, love, and the positive attitude they had toward the missionary band. So in verse 6 Paul turns to the present situation as he writes.

Paul had feared that the enemies of the gospel had poisoned the relationship between the Thessalonians and him. However, he was glad to hear that they still thought kindly of him and longed to see him, just as he longed to see them. Therefore, Paul was given new strength (he was "comforted") by the tidings brought by Timothy. Rutherford paraphrases it like this: "we were altogether miserable and crushed; but your faith has recovered us" (Morris, quoting Rutherford, 107).

The proof that the Thessalonian's faith was real brought new life to Paul. In Philippians 1:21 Paul had said, "for me to live is Christ." Part of "living for Christ" was living to Christ cherished and His sacrifice received by the Gentiles. Living for Christ included rejoicing in the fame of Christ; Jesus' glory was no more brightly displayed than in people treasuring the gospel.

3:9 For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account,

3:10 as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?

3:11 Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you;

3:12 and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you;

3:13 so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

Although many of Paul's prayers serve as models for what it means to pray for others, the one in 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 is especially revealing in its portrayal of the apostle's deepest emotions. His profound concern for his readers manifests itself not only in the prayer itself, but in the surrounding verses as well . . . Here is a Christian so committed to the well-being of other Christians, especially new Christians, that he is simply burning up inside to be with them, to help them, to nurture them, to feed them, to stabilize them, and to establish an adequate foundation for them. Small wonder, then, that he devotes himself to praying for them when he finds out he cannot visit them personally. (Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 79, 81).

Note: It should be observed that "saints" is literally "holy ones" and could very well be a reference to angels not believers (see Mk. 8:38). However, it appears more likely that it is referring to believers (1 Thess. 4:14 speaks of the dead in Christ being brought with Christ when He returns).

There are four things that reveal Paul's continuing passion for his brothers and sisters in Christ.

(the following points are from Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*. Other notes have been added as well)

1. Paul prays with rich thankfulness for the people of God (3:9).

We see in this that "Paul's prayer springs from unaffected delight at reports of the Thessalonians' faith, love, perseverance, and strength" (3:3–8; Carson, *ibid*, 84). "Every report of growth in real fundamentals – faith and love – becomes an occasion for great rejoicing" (Carson, *ibid*, 85). John thought like this, too. In 2 John 4 John wrote, "I was very glad to find some of your children walking in truth, . . ." Again, in 3 John 3 and 4 he said, "For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

Paul had already thanked God in 1 Thessalonians 1:2 and 2:13, but now we see how important thanksgiving is to Paul's prayer life. As we saw in the other two passages, thanksgiving is not addressed to the Thessalonians, but to God for the Thessalonians. Nevertheless, it is cast in such a way as to encourage them.

Paul encourages Christians by thanking God for His grace in their lives and by telling them that he thanks God for it. This is standard for Paul. (See Ro. 1:8–10; 1 Cor. 1:4–9; 2 Cor. 1:3–7; 9:12–15; Eph. 1:3ff., 15–23; Phil. 1:3–6; Col.1:3–14; 1 Thess. 1:2–3; 2:13–16; 3:9; 2 Thess. 1:3; 2 Tim.1:3–7; Phile. 4–7).

What we need is a prayer life that thanks God for the people of God, and then tells the people of God what we thank God for.

Paul's thanks to God for the Thessalonian Christians is in some measure his thanks to God for his own greatest source of joy (3:9). Paul's wording in 3:9 is remarkable. Read superficially, of course, it could

mean that Paul is simply thanking God for his own joy. If the Thessalonians are doing well, Paul's ministry is vindicated; he, therefore, feels joyful so he thanks God for the joy. But that is not what Paul is saying. He speaks of the joy he has "in the presence of our God" (NIV; "before our God" NAS) because of the Thessalonians. In other words, the joy he has is a joy shared with God, based on the kind of event that makes God himself joyful. Paul's values are so aligned with God's that the things that bring joy to God bring joy to Paul (Carson).

2. Paul prays that he might be able to strengthen these believers (3:10–11)

There are three details that demand attention:

First, Paul claims he offers this petition day and night. This means that in his regular times of prayer, day and night, he remembers the Thessalonians before the Lord (Carson, 90). From this we can learn the importance of frequent, regular prayer times, and the importance of remembering the right things when we set out to pray.

Second, Paul says that he hopes to visit them ("we . . . keep praying . . . that we may see your face") in order to complete what is lacking in their faith. "Complete" means to restore, equip, or supply. "It was used in various contexts, for example of a fisherman preparing his nets, a surgeon setting bones, and a politician reconciling factions. The deficiencies Paul detected in their faith will have been 'gaps' both in their doctrinal and in their ethical understanding. He longed to see them complete, whole, mature Christians" (Stott, 66).

This sheds light on what Paul thinks is important and on his commitment to brothers and sisters in Christ. He does not simply pray that their faith is strengthened; he prays that he himself might strengthen it. For Paul, prayer is not a substitute for Christian service; it is part of it.

Thirdly, even though Paul was aware of satanic opposition hindering him from going to them, these hindrances did not curtail his praying but incited him to greater fervency. Hindrances were not grounds for discouragement, but for renewed intercession.

NOTE: It is amazing how he combines God the Father and Jesus Christ in the same sentence; they are a double subject that is followed by a singular verb. This prayer was answered about five years later when he visited Macedonia twice toward the end of his third missionary journey.

3. Paul prays that there might be an overflow of love among these believers (3:12).

A more literal translation of verse 12 might read, "May the Lord enlarge you and make you abound in love for one another." The enlargement here is enlargement in spirit, strength, perspective, and heart.

Paul prays that the Lord (that is, Jesus) would make their love increase and overflow for each other. His desire is that there would be a surplus of love.

4. Paul prays that these believers will be so strengthened in heart that they will be blameless and holy when the end comes (3:13).

In biblical thought, the heart is not only the center of the personality, the seat of the will and understanding, but also the place where hidden motives are shaped. If our hearts are strengthened, if our resolve and guileless allegiance to Jesus Christ are enlarged, then we will not need to fear the Day of the Lord. We serve one of whom it is said that He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God (2 Cor. 4:5).

There is no prayer we can pray for ourselves or others that is more fundamental than this: that God might strengthen our hearts so that we will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father on the last day.

“Paul's prayer is the product of his passion for people. That means that if we are to improve our praying, we must strengthen our loving. As we grow in disciplined, self-sacrificing love, we will grow in intercessory prayer” (Carson, *ibid*, 85).