

2nd THESSALONIANS BIBLE STUDY

2 Thessalonians 3:1-18

Lesson #4

Introduction

We're now moving on to the last chapter of this second epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians. He's finished clearing up the erroneous teaching that the tribulation day has already started and the church had missed the catching away event that he had so clearly taught them before at his original visit, and then again in his first epistle. He put the final touch on it with chapter two of this epistle, showing that the catching away could not possibly have occurred yet, and the tribulation could not have begun because the man of sin, the antichrist, had not yet been revealed. At this point, that issue has been completely settled forever in the holy scriptures. There is no debate or ambiguity as to what the scriptures teach, despite the never ending human controversies over the issue. The scriptures say what they say, and yet, men continue to believe whatever they please. And so it will be until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone ever tells you that the scriptures don't teach this catching away event (commonly called the rapture), or that it doesn't precede the tribulation period, then you can simply smile and tell them lovingly that it most certainly does, and while they are free to believe whatever they please, you are not going to surrender your faith in the promises of God, or the inerrancy of His holy scriptures.

Now, moving on to chapter three, Paul is going to readdress a few earlier points and close his epistle. But first he requests the prayers of the saints on behalf of the gospel message:

Verses 1-5:

1 Finally, pray for us, brothers, that the Lord's message may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you, 2 and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, 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 do what we command. 5 May the Lord direct your hearts to God's love and Christ's endurance. 2 Thess 3:1-5 (HCSB)

Paul asks the church to pray for himself and his companions. But notice what it is that he asks them to pray for. He doesn't ask them to pray for his prosperity, or his comfort, or anything of worldly concern. He asks them to pray that the gospel that he preaches, which he calls the Lord's message, may spread rapidly and be honored. He asks that he and his companions may be delivered from wicked and evil men who oppose the Lord's message and harm His messengers.

Paul doesn't call it his message, but the Lord's. He's very much aware of who he is, and who he isn't; and what his role is in the spreading of the gospel. It isn't his gospel, it's the Lord's, and he's a simple messenger, assigned the task of spreading that message and teaching the new believers all those things that the Lord had shown him. It wasn't his job to edit it, and it wasn't his job to embellish it. It was his job to teach the whole counsel of God, and he solicited the prayers of the saints to assist him in the faithful completion of that task.

Paul asks to be delivered from wicked and evil men because not all have faith. Indeed, none have faith unless they're afforded that gift by the sovereign grace of God. (Eph 2:8-10) And there are very few indeed who are the recipients. (Mat 7:13-14; Luk 13:23-24) Contrary to popular opinion, not everyone can, or will be saved, and it doesn't hinge on our making the right decision, by the use of our innate faculties, it's about the sovereign grace of our almighty God, who grants the gift of saving faith to whom He chooses. (Rom 9:14-18; Jn 6:37-39, 44-45, 63-65)

Verse three says that the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and guard His own from the evil one. He goes on to say that he has confidence in the Lord that the Thessalonians are, and will continue to do as they are commanded. Of course the saints themselves are the ones who are in mind here, but Paul says his confidence is in the Lord that they will continue to obey. Why didn't he say his confidence was in the saints that they would obey? Because, as every true, regenerated believer knows, all of the desire, and all the motivation to obedience, is from the power of the indwelling Spirit of God, and not a human resource. In his epistle to the Philippians Paul wrote:

12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Phil 2:12-13 (NASB)

Paul's confidence in the continued obedience of the saints rested in his understanding and confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform and direct the actions of those whom the Lord had redeemed and regenerated. Every true believer will persevere and endure to the very end of their lives, and they will do this because they are protected by the power of God, through faith, for that salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (1Pet 1:3-5)

Paul prays that the Lord's message, which is the gospel, will spread rapidly and be honored. This can also be rendered in English as "glorified." (NASB) What does he mean by being honored, or glorified? Doesn't that just mean believed? Yes, partly, but believed in a specific manner. In verse four he explains his intent when he says that those who profess to believe will then authenticate that profession by obeying the teachings and commands of the gospel. To Paul, and to the scriptures throughout, genuine belief is always authenticated by the resultant lifestyle of the professing believer. The holy scriptures make no place for genuine belief that's apart from repentance and sanctification. A professing believer who is devoid of these will hear the Lord declare to them to depart from Him, because He has never known them.

(Mat 7:21-23)

In my 30 some years as a Christian, I've come to see that this stern warning by the Lord will still have very little effect on the vast multitudes of false professors. Apparently, none of them will be willing to consider the possibility that they might be the one He's speaking about. But, this warning is a great comfort to those who are struggling and battling with sin every day, because they know in their hearts just how much they detest that sinful flesh, and how much they hunger and thirst for the true righteousness and holiness that awaits those who seek it in truth. (Mat 5:6)

The Christian life is similar to that of a military trainee in boot camp. The days are riddled with difficulties and hardships by the express design and intent of the trainers. The intention isn't to make boot camp as easy and enjoyable as possible, in fact, it's exactly the opposite. But, it has a purpose in mind that is for the ultimate good of both the trainees and the trainers. If those trainees pay attention, and learn well, then they just might survive in a severe conflict, **and** be equipped to participate and **contribute their part** in the greater action of the entire army.

Just as no trainee entering boot camp expects an easy life, likewise no Christian should expect that his or her life on this earth is supposed to be a comfortable vacation. We will be constantly confronted by wicked and evil men (and women) who oppose the gospel and despise its followers. We must pray daily for deliverance from such as these, and from other forces of evil and wickedness that will try to prevent us from obeying the commands of our Lord and Savior.

And then, if we're paying attention, and we are diligent to learn everything we can during this time of training, then we will be thoroughly equipped to take our place in that forthcoming eternal kingdom, **and contribute our intended share** to the good of all, and the glory of God. Yes, we have already been saved, but we are all still in boot camp, we aren't yet in the kingdom. And our attitudes and expectations should be tailored accordingly. Shame on all those false teachers who preach the prosperity gospel, that this boot camp is supposed to be a glorious vacation. What utter nonsense this is, and how destructive it is to the spiritual growth and development of the true believers. The time of rest never precedes the labor, it follows it. If you're following one of these false preachers then flee immediately, and don't even look back.

Paul ends his sentence about deliverance from evil and wicked men (and women) with the statement that not all have faith. He doesn't by any means intend to establish percentages, since that varies widely, but rather he's telling them that there are some who will not, under any circumstances, ever respond favorably to the gospel message, and some will be so dangerous, and so powerful, that we need to be delivered from them by the power and grace of God alone.

This is one of those situations where we must apply those verses from Matthew 7:6 that I have often said that no one ever teaches. In his sermon on the mountain, Jesus told his disciples that they should not give what is holy to dogs, and they should not cast their pearls before swine. He used these metaphors to say that there were situations where the gospel would never be received, but only mocked, scorned and reviled, and the messengers themselves might be harmed.

He didn't mean places where some might believe and some would not, but places where everyone was obviously hostile. To be specific, like entering into a homosexual demonstration and trying to preach the gospel. That is intentionally giving what is holy to people who will vehemently defile it and take it out on the messengers. Jesus said not to do this. For some reason there seems to be multitudes who can't comprehend the difference between that situation and then turning around and warmly receiving anyone from that same group who *voluntarily comes out of it and asks to hear the gospel*.

The gospel is available, fully and freely, **to all who have ears to hear it**, but it's not ever to be used as a club to beat anybody on the head with. Not all have faith says Paul, and that's the truth of it, so, we are to make the gospel available to any and all who wish to hear it, and the one's who don't are free to do as they please; we're under no obligation to force it on anybody. Jesus never tried to force anybody to believe him, and when he was asked to leave a community, he simply did so without resistance. (Matthew chapter 8, the Gadarenes) We must all be aware, and accept the fact, that not all will ever have faith, and those who do will be in the minority, even the vast minority. This is God's own sovereignty predetermined plan from before creation, and we aren't going to change it.

Now I'd like to go back for one moment to that part of verse one where Paul prays that the gospel will spread and be honored. We mentioned this briefly already, but I want to expand on it a little more. Paul's use of the word "honored, or glorified" is meaningful. He prays that the gospel will be "honored" among those who hear it. Now he could have just said "believed," but instead he said "honored." Paul's use of this wording highlighted the point that the gospel wasn't just to be tolerated, or even admired, but to be held in such **high esteem** as to be practiced and obeyed.

This wording captures a broader thought than just believed. To be truly honored is to be believed, and respected, and observed. It's all three. It can't be honored if it isn't believed, and it can't be honored if it isn't respected and admired, and it can't be honored if it isn't observed, which is obeyed. Remove any of these and it isn't really honored. So the use of the word "honored" captures the broad spectrum of what it is to truly believe the gospel.

It is to understand and appreciate the value of it, and then believe that it's true to the degree that you do whatever you can to strictly live in accordance with it. This is the gospel believed and the gospel honored. Anything less is really only tolerated, not honored, and not really believed. **Godly behavior is the fruit that grows on the tree of regeneration.** It is progressive sanctification and repentance of sin, and joyous obedience to the word of God. Concerning recognizing false prophets, Jesus said we may judge a tree by its fruit, (Mat 7:17-19) and thus we have the means by which we may also examine ourselves as well, to see if we are genuinely in the faith. (2Cor 13:5) The validation of authenticity, of both prophets and believers, is made manifest in the fruits of obedience to the word of God, or absence thereof. A gospel honored is a gospel believed, and a gospel believed is a gospel obeyed. There are no exceptions recognized in the holy scriptures. James, the brother of Jesus, told us in his epistle that a faith that has no **corresponding** works (deeds) is dead, and has no saving value. (Jas 2:14-17) With this, I think we've made the point pretty clear, and we can move on.

Verse 5:

May the Lord direct your hearts to God's love and Christ's endurance.

This is an interesting statement. Paul prays that the Lord will direct our hearts to God's love, and then compares it to Christ's endurance. The fact is that God's love for His Son actually put Him through a horrendous ordeal. God's love for His Son didn't spare Him from hardship, it put Him right in its path. And thus we're told to see, and learn, from Christ's endurance of that hardship. This situation didn't cause Jesus to doubt his Father's love, but to endure obediently. And the final result of His obedient endurance is that his Father exalted Him above the whole creation, and made Him both King and Lord of all that exists. God's love didn't spare Jesus from grief, but rather as the scriptures say "Although he was a Son, He learned obedience from the things that He suffered." (Heb 5:8)

This being the case, where in the world do we get the idea that we're supposed to be spared hardships in this life? If the eternal Son of God learned obedience to the Father from the things that He suffered, then do we actually expect to float into the eternal kingdom on a prosperity bubble of some kind? We may prosper in some respects, and I surely have no objections to that, but if we think that our preparation to live and serve in the eternal kingdom of God, as the bride and mate of Jesus, won't involve many and various hardships and struggles that we must endure, then we're tragically blinded to God's intended purpose for our salvation *and* our final function in His kingdom, and we're beyond naive.

Paul prays that our hearts will be directed to God's love, so that we, like our Savior, will learn obedience by the things we must suffer, and thereby be made ready to take our place at the side of our beloved Lord, who Himself endured more than any of us, and remained obedient to the end. With our hearts directed on our Father's love for us, we also will all endure to the end, and know that salvation that's waiting to be revealed at the last time. (Mat 24:13; Mk 13:13) Also, as the Apostle Peter so eloquently declares in his first epistle:

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to His great mercy, He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, uncorrupted, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who are being protected by God's power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 You rejoice in this, though now for a short time you have had to be distressed by various trials 7 so that the genuineness [authenticity] of your faith —more valuable than gold, which perishes though refined by fire —may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 8 You love Him, though you have not seen Him. And though not seeing Him now, you believe in Him and rejoice with inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 because you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1:3-9 (HCSB)

To know and believe the magnitude of the love of God for us, is the most honorable impetus to empower our endurance of hardships and persecutions in this limited lifetime here on earth, so that we may receive the goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls, and experience the glory and honor and praise of our Lord Jesus Christ at His glorious appearing. But, at the same time, a healthy and reverent fear of God is never to be ignored. God the Father didn't make boot camp easy for his Son, and he didn't make it easy for His Son's followers either, but those who endure to the end will know the love of God, and the glory of his Son, in an everlasting perfect kingdom. All things will for certain, regardless of our shortsighted perceptions, ultimately work together for good for all those who love God. (Rom 8:28)

Warnings Against Irresponsible Behavior

6 Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from every brother who walks irresponsibly and not according to the tradition received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you must imitate us: we were not irresponsible among you; 8 we did not eat anyone's bread 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 walk irresponsibly, not working at all, but interfering with the work [of others]. 12 Now we command and exhort such people, by the Lord Jesus Christ, that quietly working, they may eat their own bread. 13 Brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. 14 And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take note of that person; don't associate with him, so that he may be ashamed. 15 Yet don't treat him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. 16 May the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord be with all of you. 17 This greeting is in my own hand—Paul. This is a sign in every letter; this is how I write. 18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you. 2 Thess 3:6-18 (HCSB)

Verses 6-15:

We can easily sum this section up by acknowledging that Paul issues a command, not a recommendation, and he does it in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. He's speaking specifically about some of the members of the church who had stopped working for some reason, and were simply living off the generosity of the other members. Paul reminds them that he himself, and his companions, had worked with their own hands while he was there with them the first time. Then, so there wouldn't be any later misunderstanding, he says that he did in fact have the right to be supported by them while he was serving as the Lord's appointed messenger, but he willingly abstained from the exercise of that right so that he might be an example to all the church members.

He goes on to remind them of his very words at that time, "If anyone isn't willing to work, he should not eat." Now this seems too harsh to actually be his teaching, but this is what he said, and its recorded in the scriptures. Now we know full well exactly what he means and what he doesn't mean, it's perfectly clear. He's saying that any able bodied members that refuse to work when they are fully capable of doing so, shouldn't be supported in that folly by the other members of the church. This is an irresponsible lifestyle says Paul, and the church isn't to ever support this, or any other lifestyle of

disobedience to God. To support, or tolerate, such behaviors is to enable, and even encourage, the perpetrator to continue in their folly, which reflects on the reputation of the church, and the glory of the Lord, and ultimately incurs the chastisement of that person by the Lord.

While there will always be shortsighted liberal human viewpoints on how to treat disobedience, nevertheless the holy scriptures don't waffle on this issue one iota. From Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, to Noah and the flood, to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, to the chosen children of Israel in Jerusalem; the principle of warnings against disobedience to God and chastisement for misbehavior permeate the whole of scriptures. To actively, or even passively tolerate it, is to help and assist someone in their continued disobedience, and to aid in their damage and ultimate chastisement. The principle of scriptures is to sternly warn the disobedient, and then to do whatever possible within your means to encourage their immediate repentance. Sin is to be immediately terminated, never tolerated.

Yes, there may be times when nothing you can say will turn them from their error, and they may have to let the whole thing run its course, like the prodigal son. But notice that the prodigal son had to leave his father's house and go to another town to practice his folly. His father didn't tolerate it in his own house or even in his own city. Likewise, the church can't always prevent some of the brothers and sisters from pursuing tragic follies, but we are never ever to tolerate it within the assembly of the church. To do so is to openly insult the Lord and defile His church, and disqualify it from any acceptable worship. A knowingly sinning church cannot offer prayer or worship that is acceptable to God. (Isa 59:1-3)

The idea that the church should tolerate the open and continued practice of sin because of the love of the member is nowhere even remotely suggested in holy scriptures. The church is to be a holy place unto the Lord, not a halfway house for unrepentant sinners who forever go on hearing, but can never quite come to the knowledge of the truth that saves. But this is exactly what most churches have become today. Come to our church and worship with us, bring all your sins with you, because God loves you and accepts you just as you are. This is an outright lie, and all those preaching it are false prophets, and their message is another gospel, not found in the scriptures, but in the corrupted minds of unregenerate men.

Knowing this, Paul commands the church to observe all the teachings that they received from himself and the brothers when they were there. To disassociate themselves from irresponsible brothers or sisters who didn't obey those commands that Paul had taught them. Please understand that this teaching is about professing believers in the church. Paul isn't for one moment telling them to disassociate themselves with the other towns people of Thessalonica who weren't believers. They are the mission field, they are not the church. They are expected to live in disobedience to God, because they don't know God or His ways, nor do they value the righteousness that God commands. But the whole point here is that the church doesn't in any way resemble the world, but rather stands out in stark contrast to it. The church is the visible light of Christ's righteousness to the darkened world of unbelievers, and it must be pure, and holy, and set apart, or, it's simply nothing in the eyes of the world, but another social club, and brings no glory to Christ or God. (Mat 5:13-16)

As we said earlier, while the church certainly is produced from a pool of vile lost sinners, those sinners have been regenerated and transformed by the power of the Spirit of God, and they now exist as a visible tribute to His mercy and His glory. We seem to see the church as a hospital to treat soul sick sinners who never seem to get any better, and can't find a cure. But God sees his church as a Temple, in which to proudly display His marvelous healing work of redemption, regeneration, and transformation. The church isn't a hospital for sick mankind, It's a bright lampstand of truth, it's a temple of worship, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, created as a place of worship for our Holy and Almighty God. (1Pet 2:9)

All of this is the product of our understanding that obedience to the teachings of scriptures is tantamount to the mission and the purpose of the New Testament church. God permitted nothing unclean to enter His first Tabernacle in the wilderness, and later the Temple of Solomon.

Purity and holiness were of absolute necessity, as was strict obedience to the procedures and practices. None but those who were authorized by God were allowed entry, and even to those it required strict observance of all God's procedures as taught to them by Moses and the other prophets.

When David ordered the Ark of the Covenant to be brought back to Jerusalem after its capture and subsequent return by the Philistines, he got together with the other leaders and discussed how to transport it. That error in judgement cost David's friend Uzzah his life when he reached out to steady it on the cart that was carrying it.

You see, even David, the beloved of God, when he ignored the instructions of scriptures and sought the counsel of man instead, and had the Ark transported on a cart by unauthorized men, instead of on poles by the Levites, as the scriptures demanded, ended up paying the price of irreverence, because he mistook enthusiasm and good intentions as acceptable substitutes for strict obedience to the word of God. This happens mostly when our focus on the love of God shrouds our focus on the reverent fear of God, which is a crucial balancing weight to keep us on the straight road of obedience. The scriptures declare that God is love (1Jn 4:8) and at the very same time declare that He is a consuming fire. (Heb 12:29)

The love of God alone won't always keep us obedient to God, it should, but the truth is it doesn't, because our love isn't pure. It's contaminated with love of self and pride of life, so we need the fear of God to balance out our perspective. It's undeniable that there's a severe shortage in these days of the reverent fear of God, both in the world, and worse yet, in the church itself. And because of this we've just about eliminated the preaching of obedience to God, and repentance of sin, and present day holiness of lifestyle. In the present day churches, church discipline has all but been eliminated. It's thought of as outdated, unloving, and intolerant. We've relegated these to the future kingdom, but the scriptures say that without these attributes we won't ever even see the Lord and His kingdom. (Heb 12:14)

This group of verses from Paul was a strong reminder that even in times of difficulty and extreme persecution that the word of God was to be actively sought, carefully understood, and strictly practiced in all the churches of Jesus Christ. Just one last word on this subject. In verses 14 and 15 Paul says not to associate with disobedient believers so they will be ashamed of themselves. He doesn't seem to be too concerned with their self-esteem does he? - but rather with their walk before God. (I can't tell you how many messages I've heard preached recently on self-esteem - and all of them had it exactly backwards)

But please let's take notice that the whole point is not to bring them harm, or unleash angry rage, but solely to convict them, and humble them, and restore them to repentance, and put them back into the grace and love of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation and restoration is the proper disciplinary motive of a pure heart, not retribution, any and all of that belongs entirely to the Lord. Remember the parable in Matthew 18, verses 23 through 35, about the slave who was forgiven a great debt by his master, but then refused to forgive a minuscule debt from one of his debtors. Let us never fall into that trap of unforgiveness of others who have fallen into sin and then truly repent, when we ourselves have been forgiven more than we can ever even know. The brother of the prodigal son is a classic example, he was angry, rather than joyful, over his brother's repentance and restoration.

Finally, in verses 16-18, Paul wishes them the peace that the Lord bestows on His own beloved, and tells them to take notice of the closing summary, written in his own handwriting, that he always includes in his authentic letters. We remember that there had been reference made to a bogus letter presented to the church that some had introduced to support their heretical teachings, so Paul tells them to look for his own authenticating mark before they accept any letters that are suppose to be written by him. With this he closes his epistle with a prayer that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ would be with all of them. To this I say Amen, and add my prayer that this grace would be upon all of us this day as well, and continuing on until His glorious return. Amen.

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