

Present Priorities

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- [0 : 00] Good afternoon and welcome to our lunchtime Bible talk for today. We're continuing our study on Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians today. Before we read that together, let's pray.
- Father, we thank you that we can join together this afternoon to spend time studying your word together. As we do that now, would you help us to leave behind the distractions of work of what we have to focus on day to day in order to take this time to listen to you speaking to us through your word.
- And in turn, as we hear you speak, may that impact upon our lives as we do return to our occupations and what we do day to day.
- Be with us in this half hour, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Please do turn your Bibles to 2 Thessalonians chapter 3. The Church Visitor's Bible, that's on page 990.
- We're going to be reading the start of chapter 3 together, verses 1 to 5. 2 Thessalonians 3, verses 1 to 5. Finally, brothers, pray for us that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men.
- [1 : 39] For not all have faith, but the Lord is faithful. He will establish you, or strengthen you, and guard you against the evil one.
- And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.
- Amen. This is God's word. May he bless it to us. The school I went to growing up had drama festivals each year, and that meant that each year group had to put on a play with everyone involved.
- One year, my part was to come on at the very end of our play as the policeman and finally arrest the bad guy. I was looking forward to this with great anticipation.
- I'd bought my handcuffs. I'd got a pretend gun. I'd even got a hat in order to be ready for it. And thinking I was fine for a while, that my part was not to the very end of the play, I got complacent.
- [2 : 48] I lost track of what was happening and ruined the crescendo. Only being concerned about the finale meant I missed my cue and messed everything up.
- I didn't take seriously the present. And so I was preoccupied and complacent. Paul has spent a large part of this letter talking about the future, talking about Christ's return, and trying to help the Thessalonians see it properly.
- He wants them to have clear the real hope that they have. He wanted them to be able to persevere through opposition. And now as we move into chapter 3, Paul wants it to be clear that Christians aren't just to think about the future and just do what we can to hold out for our reward at the end, but rather Christians, when faced with opposition, mustn't become inward and insular, avoiding any conversations, any interactions that may bring more trouble.

Paul wants us to see that what we hope for shapes what we live for. So Paul in chapter 3 is turning our focus onto the present in light of the future.

And Paul is saying in today's passage that the church's present occupation is an obedience that prioritizes the spread of God's word. We see this first in verses 1 to 2.

[4 : 17] We must prioritize gospel work. We must prioritize gospel work. The future must not preoccupy us away from what we must be doing now, and that is investing in the spread of God's word.

There's a danger of being so preoccupied with the future that it stops what we're meant to be doing now. In the face of persecution, the answer is not to hide away.

It isn't to withdraw into a bunker and wait until we can claim by sight all that we've hoped for. Paul says we must keep going, not letting suffering and difficulty cause us to give up.

And keeping going is both keeping believing and keeping doing what God wants us to do now. And that includes gospel work.

So, verse 1, Paul asks for prayer. And the request has three things to pray for. Firstly, verse 1, he asks them to pray that the word may go out.

[5 : 24] That is the task with which Paul was throwing his whole life into. He wanted to make Jesus known. He wanted to spread the very words of God by proclaiming that Jesus has risen from the dead by planting churches just like this one in Thessalonica.

Paul wants the Thessalonians to be on board with that, partnering with him in the spread of God's word. He uses the phrase, speed ahead. Paul is urgent in the present to make the most of his time.

Where he's writing from is Corinth, and he's really up against it. They're not a church like the Thessalonians who have received and honored God's word well. He faces lots of opposition.

But Paul's asking for the Thessalonians to pray for his work, that the gospel would really be affecting lives. Which is why he also says, secondly, in verse 1, that the word would be obtained.

Not just that it would be going out, but it would be being obtained. Paul's concerned that it be honored, that it be responded to. His gospel work wasn't so that he could tick a box to say he'd been obedient.

[6 : 39] He cared that his gospel was achieving things. This letter was written to a church that had obtained and honored God's word themselves. Paul's great labors were to achieve something.

We read all over the New Testament that the future kept him going when things were hard. But we also read that he longed for the growth of the church in the present. He says in Philippians, it would be better for him to depart and be with Christ.

But in order for the Philippians to progress, he wants to remain so that they may have ample cause to glory in Christ. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, he says, For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus that is coming?

Is it not you? For you, you Thessalonians, are our glory and joy. Paul's saying that Christians, yes, we have a wonderful hope.

But he's also saying there is a present joy that comes in seeing the gospel take root in people's lives, being honored like the Thessalonians have honored it. The Thessalonians were living and tangible fruit of all that Paul had been doing.

[7 : 53] And so the final request in the prayer is in verse 2. He asks them to pray that his work wouldn't be opposed. He's asking to be delivered from the evil men who oppose his work, while some like the Thessalonians have gladly received his word and borne fruit.

Paul writes from Corinth where things are very different. If we look at the end of verse 2, there's a sort of bizarre phrase. For not all have faith.

Perhaps it would be more helpfully read, for not all have faith that should have faith. There was opposition to Paul's work all around, even from those within the church at Corinth.

And Paul wants his gospel partners to help speed the word, not hinder it. God's word will be opposed.

We know that. We just need to look around the world, at the world around us. We just need to talk about Jesus in public. But Paul is asking for deliverance from opposition, that this work wouldn't be hindered, that those who ought to partner with him, those who ought to be on board, would be on board, that they would help, that they would not hinder.

[9 : 09] But either way, Paul's priority stays the same. Even if affliction is present now, and we have to wait for a time, then that doesn't mean we put a stop to gospel work.

It must be the priority over even our own comforts. When learning to play a new game, you have to first learn the rules, in order to find out how to play and how to win.

But once you know how to win, and you set your sights on that, you still have to play to get there. Having a secure hope and longing for it, means we have to play the game.

We have to live this life faithfully. And that will always include prioritizing gospel work. Because what we hope for shapes what we live for.

It would be very easy for us to keep our heads down when things get difficult, to not create a fuss at work, to not become the unpopular neighbor who likes to talk about Jesus, to be a Christian, but never putting our necks out, to make a stand for what's true.

[10 : 23] So what does it look like to have our lives shaped by our hope? It means that losing some credit with people around us, looking silly in a discussion with our colleagues because we believe in Jesus, won't put us off.

That it won't stop us from telling people about Jesus because it is the life to come that drives us, and not this one. It looks like being intentional now and contributing to gospel work.

For some, that may be one-off conversations on the train or in the garden where you try to tell someone about Jesus. For others, we might think, evangelism, I just can't do that.

That's not what I'm good at. I'm not suited to that kind of thing. Well, notice that Paul here is asking for prayer. That is participating in gospel work.

He doesn't say here something like, everyone must go to Corn Hill and be trained how to be a preacher. The church functions together as a body in prioritizing gospel work.

[11 : 32] So what does it look like for a church to have its collective life shaped by our hope to come? It looks like some primarily preaching.

It looks like some primarily evangelizing. Some primarily praying faithfully. For some, it will primarily be acts of service that enable others to hear or preach the gospel.

For some, it will be welcoming new people warmly, looking around at the service you're at and seeing someone who looks unfamiliar and giving them a warm welcome. For some, it will be babysitting so a friend or a single parent can go to Bible study or Christianity Explored.

For others, it might be offering to give a lift each week to a young person so that they can go to youth club. The church is a body and it is as a body, as a whole church, that we must prioritize gospel work together.

We can't pray for Paul's missionary endeavors now. He's dead. But we can still pray that the word will speed ahead. And so no voice at a church prayer meeting, even if it's just praying quietly, will ever be a waste.

[12 : 46] But also on top of praying for the spread of God's word, we can participate in it. Each one of us can play a part in this. And isn't that an encouraging thing?

That each of us playing our part, however small it feels to us, is part of the church spreading God's word, part of the church investing in God's word, speeding ahead and being honored.

Paul is surely wanting the church to pray, but it's not simply about prayer. It is about prioritizing the gospel in the here and now. It is partnering in the spread of the gospel.

And that's what we see in verses three to five. Paul goes on to say that we can persist with gospel work in the present. We can persist with gospel work because we have a God who is faithful from now to eternity.

He doesn't just allow you chaos now because in the end things are going to be okay. No, no. He is faithful both at the end, as we've seen throughout this letter, but he is also controlling the here and now too.

[13 : 55] Paul in verse four says, he is confident that the Thessalonians are doing and will do what he has commanded. What is that command? Well, we'll see a bit more of that next week because he picks it up in verse six.

But certainly in the context of Paul's prayer request and the hinge of the letter in chapter two, verse 17, where Paul prays that they be strengthened for every good work and word, this includes gospel work.

So Paul is confident that they are doing and will persist with doing the good works of the Christian life, which includes gospel work.

Why is he confident? He says in verse four, he's confident in the Lord. And in verse three, he's confident because God is faithful unlike those without faith.

Whilst there is certain opposition to gospel work, verse two, that gives way to the fact that God is always faithful, verse three. So Paul's grounds for confidence that the Thessalonians will be able to keep doing what they're meant to do.

[15 : 06] The confidence that we can have, that we can keep doing what we're meant to do is not in ourselves. It's confidence in God.

This church have put their faith in what he has said. They belong to him. One of the characteristics of the Thessalonian letters is Paul's repeated delight and confidence in them.

He looks at this church and sees that they have truly bought into the gospel. They love each other. They're sure of their hope. They model faith.

He is always thankful for them. He boasts about them to other churches because he has seen that they genuinely honor God's words. Verse one, he knows that they've responded rightly to God's word and will keep on doing it.

Verse four, because as anyone truly clings to God and his words, then God will, verse three, strengthen them and more than that, he will guard them so that not even Satan can prevail.

[16 : 13] We have a God who is faithful and he will guard us in the present against Satan and all of his attacks and this church would have known about them all too well. We can persist with gospel work because of God's faithfulness which plays out in his predestining fatherly care.

We read in chapter two, verse 14, that God has chosen, he's called them to obtain the glory of Jesus. not just to be saved now but to reach the last day to obtain the glory of Jesus and so to that end, they can trust that he will strengthen and guard them.

We can keep on doing gospel work now even when it's hard, even when the world around us hates it. Opposition to the gospel will always be present but the conclusion we should draw from that is not that we shouldn't do gospel work but rather that whilst we're doing it we look to God to sustain us.

As James Philip puts it, the sovereignty of God ever stands over against the opposition of men and he will do his work in spite of them and the necessary corollary of this is that the difficulties and sufferings of the path of Christian service will not prove too great for those who trust in him.

And so Paul finishes this section with his own prayer. Partnership isn't selfish. Paul returns the prayer. Verse 5 Paul prays for them that God would keep them loving him and standing fast with Christ for no other person and no other power can keep us going aside from her faithful God.

[18 : 09] Do you feel under pressure? Do you find it really difficult to step out and witness for Jesus? we can do it if we trust in the God who can sustain us who can keep us standing fast.

the human body is an amazing thing. In order to keep the temperature to what it should be it has measures to control it has measures to cool the body and heat the body.

The hairs on our arms control how much warm air is trapped so lots of tiny little muscles keep those hairs doing what will best moderate body temperature. Sweat glands release sweat to increase heat loss.

the body can maintain optimum temperature because measures like these persist in helping the body cope. There is a constant unseen help in these things.

We can't magically make ourselves sweat or not sweat although I'm sure some of us would like that but similarly as God's people we can keep going maintaining our priorities because we have a faithful God who will keep on giving us what we need when we need it.

[19 : 26] He will strengthen us when we need it and guard us when we need it and often it will be unseen but with all of his power still there strengthening and guarding us to keep going with him.

We have a God who is faithful from now to eternity. He doesn't just leave us be now because our hope is secure in the end. no, he's here in the midst controlling things in the present too.

So it may well be that doing the Lord's work will be difficult now but not only do we have a wonderful hope to look forward to but in the midst of it we can have confidence that God will be the fuel for his people doing his work.

so it may be that as we try to tell people about Jesus as we try to witness for him as we try to live for him that we are forever going to be victims.

The world hates the gospel of Jesus. On top of that Satan is at work to deceive all around us. The Thessalonians were afflicted victims of scorn for the sake of Christ but we are not just victims for we are also victors.

[20 : 45] If we honor Jesus and his word and prioritize it he will strengthen and guard us until the last glorious day when we will see Jesus trample Satan trample the deceiver trample the man of lawlessness.

Elsewhere we read that Christians are exiles not at home here outcasts in this world but elect exiles who know what's in store at the end or as Romans 8 puts it for following Jesus we may be killed all the day long but in all these things we are more than conquerors.

We can persist with gospel work in the present we can persist with obediently following the Lord now even if it's really difficult because if God is for us who can be against us we can keep putting up with discomfort and difficulty with affliction and agony with frustration and fear because God is faithful it's in him that we have confidence to keep doing what we must do so as we have the glory of Christ return on our minds as we know the security of what's in store for us at the end may we put our all now into serving Christ as his family doing our each of us doing our part and as we do that we can have Paul's prayer in mind may the Lord direct our hearts to keep loving him and to enjoy the steadfastness of Christ for the Lord is faithful

Amen Let's pray Father we thank you that you have given us the Lord Jesus and with him all spiritual blessings that we can imagine we do ask that as we strive to live for him strive to have our lives shaped by the hope we have in him that you would keep us going that you enable us to serve you more and better for we pray these things in his name trusting that you are faithful Amen