

3. Eternal Salvation is Paul's Top Priority

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[0 : 00] Isn't that a lovely prayer to pray just before the sermon?

So set my heart to love your word and every promise prove. I trust that will be true for all of us this evening. Now we come this evening to this quite long central section of 1 Thessalonians from chapter 2 verse 13, page 986 if your Bible is closed, chapter 2 verse 13 through to chapter 3 verse 13.

And I want to suggest that in this section the Apostle Paul bears his heart to the Thessalonians and indeed to us and he shows us what is the big aim of his whole life and work.

If we want to touch Paul's heartbeat, I think it would be hard to find a passage anywhere in the New Testament letters, in his letters, which is quite as close to it as this one. And let's remember that Paul speaks for Jesus, doesn't he?

He is the Apostle of the Lord Jesus. So if we're able to touch Paul's heartbeat, in a sense we're touching the Lord's as well. But before we look into the passage to try to discover this big aim of Paul's life and work, let me ask what have been some of the big aims and concerns of Christian churches and Christian individuals over the centuries.

[1 : 26] Let me name just a few. The relief of poverty. Provision of hospitals and healing for the sick. Pressing for political institutions and legislation which accords with the Bible.

Pressing for the reformation of manners in society. I was interested to discover recently that William Wilberforce, as well as his great work to abolish the slave trade, was very concerned for the reformation of manners in British society.

Bringing hope to drug addicts and prostitutes. Establishing schools and improving education. The list could go on and on. It's a long list. And these are all wonderful aims.

These are Christian ambitions which have their roots deep in the soil of the Bible. Now Paul the Apostle was explicitly concerned for at least some of these things.

But our passage shows that his biggest aim was to see his Thessalonian friends eternally saved at the return of Christ. That, I'm suggesting, was the main purpose of his life.

[2 : 32] That by his preaching and teaching, people should be transferred from the realm of darkness, being under the wrath of God, to the security of heaven, to membership of the great multitude of those who are redeemed forever.

So what I want to do tonight is to try to persuade you that Paul is expressing precisely this aim in this section of 1 Thessalonians. That his prime interest is not that the Thessalonians should be happy or gainfully employed or that they should enjoy a good relationship with him and Silas and Timothy, though he is concerned for all of those things, but rather that his prime interest is that they should be eternally saved.

Now in many churches today, the main interest seems to focus more on the concerns of this world, even to the extent of despising the eternal gospel, writing it off as pie in the sky when you die, and that kind of thing.

So friends, are you ready to gird up the loins of your minds? If your eyes have strayed up to the ceiling, if your heart has drifted over the street to the blue lagoon, call them to order.

Set your eyes on the text and put your heart in the right place. And as an opening taster, let's look at chapter 2, verse 19, nearly the last verse of chapter 2. What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming?

[3 : 58] Is it not you? Do you see how he relates the Thessalonian Christians to the Lord Jesus at his coming? That means, of course, his return, his second coming. Paul's wonderful, fertile, spirit-led imagination is taking him forward to that great and awesome day of the return of the Lord.

And he pictures himself here presenting the Thessalonian Christians to the Lord Jesus. It's as though the Lord Jesus says to Paul, Paul, are you rejoicing? And he replies, yes, Master. I am rejoicing because these believers from Thessalonica are people that I and my friends preach the gospel to, and here they are. They are yours, and they are yours forever. They were kept by your grace through suffering and affliction and persecution. They have persevered to the end and are saved. And I'm simply delighted and thrilled to see them here in your presence today.

They're the crowning joy of my labors. I confess I had my moments when I was wondering if my work might prove to be in vain. Moments when I feared that they might fall by the wayside because of persecution and pressure, that they might prove to be like the seeds sown in shallow ground or the seeds sown amongst thorns.

[5 : 12] But no, they've continued by your grace as Christians, and here they are, my hope and joy and crown of boasting. Now for a second opening taster, look at chapter 3, verse 13.

So that he, that's the Lord Jesus, may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

So Paul wants, and he prays here, that their hearts should be established, in other words, that they should be firm, enduring Christians, blameless in holiness before God.

When? In Thessalonica, in the first century? Well, yes, of course Paul wanted that too, but that's not what this verse is about. This is all about their hearts being established, firm and rock-like at the return of Jesus.

So do you see how Paul's eye is fixed on the far horizon? His gospel preaching is never a matter purely for this world. Now of course Paul is concerned about the Thessalonian Christians' lives in this world in the sense that he very much wants them to live godly lives, strikingly holy lives, in the presence of their neighbours, in the local community.

[6 : 32] They need to commend Christ and the gospel by submitting to the secular authorities, by working hard, by helping the poor and weak in society, and so much else besides.

But Paul's eye is always, so to speak, on the home straight and the finishing tape. He's thinking about the eternal destiny of his Thessalonian friends. And in chapters 2 and 3 of this letter, he is frankly expressing his anxiety, lest in the end these beloved Thessalonians might fall away and might not be amongst the multitude of the redeemed.

Do you see this anxiety in chapter 3 verse 5? For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labour, our evangelism, our preaching, would be in vain.

Now perhaps somebody here is wanting to say, come on Edward, surely Paul is more of a Calvinist than you're painting him to be. Is he really anxious about the eternal state of these Thessalonians? Doesn't he believe in irresistible grace and God's predestinating election? In fact, didn't Paul write to the Romans that those whom God predestined, he also called?

[7 : 52] And those whom he called, he also justified? And those whom he justified, he also glorified? Yes, thank God. Paul did write those wonderful words.

And he believed them. And they are for us to believe tenaciously as well. And if Paul and John Calvin were able to sit down together over a cup of tea, I have no doubt that they would be able to delight greatly in each other's company.

Calvin reveling in the letters and sermons of Paul, and Paul delighting in Calvin's expositions of the Bible and of the great doctrines. You can picture them as humble blood brothers in the service of Christ.

But if we think that Paul had no anxiety about whether these Thessalonian Christians were going to persevere to the end in the Christian faith, we have simply lost the capacity to read.

In fact, we might as well cut these chapters out of our Bibles and throw them away. Paul's concern is for the eternal safety of his beloved Thessalonians.

[8 : 55] But he is anxious, lest, in the words of chapter 3, verse 5, somehow the tempter might have tempted them to desert Christ, which would mean that his labor would prove to have been in vain.

So let's turn to the text, and we'll see how it is that Paul expresses his overriding concern for the ultimate safety of the Thessalonians. And we'll take the passage in three sections.

First, chapter 2, verses 13 to 20. Paul rejoices that their sufferings did not turn the Thessalonians away from the Lord.

That's my first heading there. He rejoices that their sufferings did not turn them away from the Lord. In chapter 2, verses 13 and 14, Paul is writing about the way that the Thessalonians originally received the gospel message.

Now, Paul brings the clock forward to the present when he gets into chapter 3. But in chapter 2, verses 13 and 14, he's writing about their initial reception of the gospel when he and Silas and Timothy first preached.

[10:00] And things looked very good back then. The mission started well. See how Paul puts it here in verse 13. We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it, not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God which is at work in you believers.

So Paul is thinking back to the initial meetings that he had with them in the synagogue. Remember, he was just there for three Sabbaths in the synagogue in Thessalonica. And it was then that he opened up the extraordinary message that Jesus was the Christ of the Old Testament expectation. Now many Jews hated that message, wouldn't swallow it, couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that a man crucified on a cross could be God's anointed Messiah.

But some of these Thessalonian Jews did believe Paul's message. To use Luke's phrase in Acts chapter 17, verse 4, some of them were persuaded.

And as Paul looks back on those early meetings, here in chapter 2, verse 13, he remembers just how they received the gospel. They didn't dismiss it as a mere human fabrication, what Paul calls the words of men.

[11:14] They received it for what it really is, the word of God. In other words, they turned to each other with their jaws dropping open and they said to each other, Brothers, this is surely the truth from heaven.

Jesus is the Messiah. We must believe Paul's message and obey it. But Paul is not content merely to say, in verse 13, that they accepted his gospel as the very message of God.

He wants to show them why he's so sure that they did receive it as the word of God. So verses 14 to 16 give the Thessalonians the reason why Paul was so sure that they'd really believed.

In a nutshell, he's saying to them, you were prepared to endure persecution at the hands of your own countrymen. And you wouldn't have done that unless you really believed that my gospel was true and ultimately important.

Now just think of our own world today. We know that nobody is prepared to endure persecution for a cause unless he is deeply convinced of the rightness and truth of that cause.

[12:23] Now these Thessalonians had only been Christians for a week or two at this stage. And yet so totally had they been persuaded of the truth of the gospel that they were prepared to endure the jeering and the shouting and the jostling and the rotten eggs and tomatoes coming at them from, not from strangers, but from their own countrymen, from people who'd been their friends only a week or two before.

The gospel will always have this divisive effect upon communities. It will divide those who are the friends of Jesus from those who at heart are his enemies. Jesus himself said that he'd not come to bring peace but a sword.

That his message would divide people even from the members of their own families. So any church that preaches the gospel fruitfully in Glasgow today is bound to put up barriers between former friends.

It's bound to cause rifts and tensions even within families. But what did Paul make of the divisive consequences of his gospel preaching? Did he say to the Thessalonians, I'm so sorry and regretful now that I caused those riots in your city.

I'm so ashamed of myself for upsetting the community apple cart. No. Look at verse 13. He thanked God constantly because the young Christians having embraced the gospel were prepared to take a pasting for it at the hands of their own fellow citizens.

[13:53] So far then, so good. The initial response of the Thessalonians was wonderful to Paul. But was his work finished?

Could he, after that initial evangelistic work, could he get out his deck chair and open a bottle of port and light a cigar and congratulate himself on the completion of a wonderful missionary journey to

Thessalonica?

No. His work was by no means finished. Really, it had only just begun. Look how he puts it here in verse 17. But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person, not in heart, we endeavoured them more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face because we wanted to come to you.

I, Paul, again and again, but Satan hindered us. And why does Paul want to see them again so much? He tells us in chapter 3, verse 10. We pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and, here's the reason, supply what is lacking in your faith.

So here's my second point. Paul longs to see the Thessalonian Christians so as to supply what is lacking in their faith. Now, that phrase, what is lacking in your faith, is a provocative phrase.

[15:18] Does it mean that their faith was second class or that they weren't really Christians at all? No, it doesn't mean that. We've just seen in chapter 2, verse 13, that Paul remembers joyfully how they received the gospel as the very word of God which he says is at work in you believers.

They're believers. Believing men and women, that's the way Paul sees them. But their faith is still very young and their understanding of the gospel and of how to live the Christian life is still very limited.

Inevitably, they've only been Christians for five minutes. So Paul wants to get back to them as soon as he can so as to teach them. Let me just say this, if you're still a young Christian, perhaps in the first year or two of being a Christian, ask the Lord to give you an insatiable appetite to learn the Bible and the gospel and the lifestyle that springs from the gospel.

And then with that insatiable appetite, get taught the scriptures. You can put off your night school classes in car maintenance and carpentry and how to cook like Delia Smith.

All that can wait to a later stage in life, can't it? But come to church and get taught the Bible and how to live by the Bible. It's the big thing. That's what Paul wanted to do for these Christians.

[16:36] That's why he wanted to get to them so urgently. There was so much still absent in their understanding and their grasp of the message. Paul needed to teach them a great deal more about the Bible, how Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

And he needed to teach them as well about a number of ethical issues, about sexual purity and chastity, such an urgent problem in the first century as it is today, and about loving each other in the church, about daily work and its place in life.

And Paul wanted to teach them what it means to die as a Christian and how to look forward to the Lord's return. And these are things that he touches on fairly briefly in chapters 4 and 5 of this letter. But what he really wanted to do was to get back to them and spend a few months with them and take them through the length and breadth of Christian teaching. So if you had been one of these new Christians in the church at Thessalonica, you can imagine yourself getting home from your day's work.

You'd have bolted your tea down in 10 minutes. You'd have rushed out of the door with your scarf flying over your shoulders to get down to the meeting house and to listen to the Apostle Paul speaking from 7pm till about 11 o'clock.

[17:50] And you'd have got home tired but happy. You'd be growing as a Christian. And that is what Paul so much wanted to see happening. And why this almost desperate eagerness to get back to them?

Because he feared for them. He was anxious about them. He feared that they might be like the seed sown in shallow and rocky soil that springs up quickly but then in the difficulty of persecution and affliction withers and fades away.

And he couldn't bear to think that that might happen to them. He wanted to get back to them and work his socks off so as to strengthen them and give them what they needed if they were to stand firm and grow.

Just look at the sheer humanity and love with which Paul expresses his feelings in the first five verses of chapter 3. Therefore, when we could bear it no longer, well, bear what no longer?

The suspense of not knowing how they were faring under persecution. He'd had no news of them. No emails were possible in those days. They weren't even carrier pigeons.

[19:00] He just didn't know whether the church still existed in Thessalonica. And he had to know because he loved them. So he sent Timothy in verse 2 to strengthen them and establish them.

Why? Verse 3, so that no one be moved, shifted, toppled by these afflictions, the persecutions they were enduring. And then he reminds them that this affliction is all part of the package.

For you yourselves know that we were destined for this, he says. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction just as it has come to pass and as you know.

In other words, I forewarned you and you understood the deal. You know and remember that I said all this. So, verse 5, for this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent Timothy to learn about your faith for fear.

There was something he couldn't bear and there was something that he feared. He couldn't bear the suspense of not knowing how they were and he feared lest they'd succumb to the devil's temptation to throw in the towel.

[20 : 10] Now, of course Paul believed in God's grace and predestinating and electing, but it didn't stop him being anxious about his Thessalonian friends and it didn't stop him from being utterly determined to teach them.

And strengthened them and spent himself for them. And as Paul was to the Thessalonians, so we are called to be to each other. Paul often writes, follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.

So if Paul's great concern is to teach and love and shepherd his Christian friends all the way to eternal salvation, that needs to be our concern too in our generation.

of course we believe in predestination and election, but that's all the more reason to be up and active in taking each other by the hand and helping each other into eternal glory, teaching each other, strengthening each other's defences against the wiles of the tempter.

Just think for a moment of the person who is sitting next to you. You haven't got to look at that person a bit much at this time of the evening, isn't it? But just think of the person sitting next to you. Your responsibility and mine is to help to bring that person to eternal glory by establishing them and strengthening them in the faith because they are bound to suffer afflictions which will threaten their stability.

[21 : 39] The person sitting next to you will suffer afflictions which will be a threat to their stability. Now we're still on point number two, but let me point out a striking feature of the paragraph that runs from verses six to ten in chapter three.

I'm going to give you an on the one hand this, but on the other hand that. Are you ready for that? It's going to take me about a minute to get from the one hand to the other hand, so just prepare yourselves.

So on the one hand, these Thessalonians are standing fast in the Lord. That's the way Paul expresses it in verse eight. For now we live, now we live and breathe and rejoice to know that you're standing fast in the Lord.

And how does he know that they're standing fast in the Lord? Because, verse six, Timothy has just returned from Thessalonica with the good news of their faith and love, of how they remember Paul very fondly and long to see him again.

So that report from Timothy has brought Paul huge relief from the unbearable suspense that he speaks of in verse one and in verse five, those points where he says, when I could bear it no longer.

[22 : 49] So, on the one hand, they're standing fast in the Lord, Paul rejoices to hear of it, Timothy's report shows that their conversion was not just a spurious conversion, it wasn't like one of those November the fifth fireworks, rockets, that goes up in the sky and then it's all over in two minutes.

Not like that at all. The signs are that they're going on very well. As Jim Packer once wrote, what matters is not past conversion but present convertedness.

And Timothy's report shows that there are good signs of present convertedness in these Christians. But, on the other hand, Paul still realizes that he must supply what is lacking in their faith.

So, they're standing fast but they're still lacking. Now, does that seem like a contradiction? Surely not. If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you'll know what it is to stand fast but you'll equally know that your faith needs to be shored up and strengthened and developed because it's far from complete.

So, here's a plea from me. Let's imbibe the spirit of Paul and take every step we can to supply what is lacking in the faith of others, especially those who are young in the faith like these Thessalonian Christians.

[24 : 10] And all of us are able to do that in our own way. It's not just the experienced and trained Bible teachers who can supply what is lacking in the faith of others. All of us can play a part.

So, for example, you might be a motherly woman of 60 or 70 plus, perhaps no Bible teacher, perhaps the kind of lady who still doesn't know where to find Habakkuk or 2nd Chronicles. I find it pretty hard to find where Habakkuk and 2nd Chronicles are myself. But anyway, you're no teacher, but you are a warm-hearted, loving woman. And you can be such an encouragement to young Christians.

So you might have spotted a shy, quiet, young-looking member of the congregation who doesn't seem to know many people and who, like many younger people, finds it difficult to initiate conversations with older folk.

Why don't you boldly go up to that younger person and invite him or her to come round to your home for a meal? It can make such a difference to that person. I think of my wife Catherine who came from Manchester, as English as me, and she arrived at the age of 18 at St. Andrew's University, quite a number of years ago.

[25 : 21] And she didn't know a kilt from a sporran. Now, she was already a Christian at that stage. And she went to one of the churches in the town and one of the older women in the congregation, a sweetheart called Sissy Philp, dear Sissy.

She invited Catherine and another English girl to come and have Sunday lunch with her. And for the next three years, while she was a student there, those two girls went to Sissy's for Sunday lunch about three or four times every term.

And it so helped to build them up and to supply what was lacking in their faith as young believers.

And when we look at Paul's relationship with the Thessalonians, it's actually two-way traffic.

Yes, at one level, he is the one to supply what is lacking in their faith because he is the vastly experienced preacher and teacher. So at the level of Bible understanding, they can't teach him. It's he that teaches them. But at a different level, they help him enormously. Look at the words he uses in verses 7, 8 and 9. Comforted. Live.

[26 : 27] Thanksgiving. Joy. That's what the news of their firm faith does to him. It brings him comfort, life, thanksgiving and joy.

It's very much two-way traffic. Now, why is Paul so concerned to supply what is lacking in their faith? Because, simply, he wants them to persevere to the end.

That's the motive. He wants their faith to be so strengthened and encouraged and filled out that they will be amongst the number of the redeemed when Christ returns. Just look back to chapter 1, verse 4.

We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you. You see, Paul has no doubt that they're chosen. They're of the elect. But does that mean that he now sits back in his deck chair and opens the Sunday times?

No. It's because he believes that they're chosen by God that he commits himself to labor to teach them so that they will persevere as Christians to the end. Think of Calvin in Geneva.

[27 : 33] He believed and taught the great biblical doctrines of predestination and election. And did that mean that he spent his days playing billiards and shove hapenny in the Geneva arms?

Certainly not. He wore himself out, preaching daily to the people of Geneva for years on end, supplying what was lacking in their faith. So for Paul, it wasn't enough to know that in the words of chapter 1, verse 4, God had chosen the Thessalonians.

And it still wasn't enough for him to have Timothy's report that some months later they were still standing fast in the Lord. And it still wasn't enough for Paul to send the Thessalonians this letter with its great encouragements and teaching.

Paul also wanted to get back to them and spend time with them to supply what was still lacking because nothing mattered to him quite so much as to see these Thessalonians brought to eternal salvation.

He knew that the ongoing teaching was indispensable. And then thirdly, Paul prays that these Thessalonian Christians will be filled with increasing and abounding love, but for a purpose.

[28 : 51] Let's look here at the final paragraph of chapter 3, verses 11 to 13. This is really a prayer in which Paul is telling the Thessalonians in what terms he's praying for them.

First in verse 11, he repeats his longing that the Lord would direct his steps to them. And then in verse 12, he prays, may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all

as we do for you.

And you see in verse 12, there are three spheres of love that he mentions. First, there's the Thessalonians love for each other. Love is always a supreme hallmark of a good Christian church. Secondly, there is love for all, not just for each other, that's the Christians, but for all. So people outside, real Christian love looks out into the street as well as within at the pew.

And then thirdly, as a measuring stick for their love, Paul mentions his love for them. And Paul prays that this love may increase and abound.

[29 : 58] In other words, if we in this church love each other this much in 2008, Paul would pray that we come to love each other this much in 2009 and this much in 2010.

Oak trees from acorns do grow. Our love is to grow. We're to learn to abound in love for each other. Why? Well, verse 13 conveniently begins with a so that.

So that, that is the Lord, he, the Lord Jesus, may establish your hearts. How? In what way are they to be made firm and strong? Blameless in holiness?

In relation to whom? Before our God and Father. When? Now? Next year? No. At the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

So do you see the point in history, or really I should say at the end of history, to which Paul's eye is drawn as he prays for his friend, his friends? It's the coming. It's the return of Jesus.

[31 : 02] So the love of these Christians for each other and for those outside the church is to grow and multiply. Of course Paul is thinking there of their love for each other in this world.

That's where their love is to count and will make a great difference. But always Paul's eye is on the far horizon because the goal of his evangelism is the return of Christ. So we must let Paul train our eye to be on that same far horizon.

The goal of Paul's evangelism never stops within this world. His great purpose is to lead his Christian friends into the eternal kingdom of heaven.

Now it's this purpose you see that underlies everything we've looked at this evening. If the Thessalonians endure suffering and persecution, it's a sign that they're persevering towards the end.

And if Paul is able to get there and see them again and spend time with them, teaching them and developing their faith and understanding, that will hugely help them in their strength to persevere.

[32 : 07] And if the Lord causes their love to grow and increase, it will be so as to establish their hearts blameless at the coming of Christ. In Paul's eyes, the real fruit of evangelism is beyond this world.

As he puts it in 1 Corinthians 15, if in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. Now if this is Paul's view, it needs to be ours, because these words are here to train us.

The great purpose of the evangelistic work of the church is to bring people to heaven, to the new order, where death and pain are no more and where we shall rejoice in the Lord forever.

Just imagine the year 2108.

To look at my numbers carefully. Imagine the year 2108. In other words, exactly 100 years from now. What will be important about your life then?

[33 : 16] Not whether you were beautiful or plain, not whether you had many talents or few, not whether you were rich or poor, well-known or obscure.

In 2108, your fears and joys, your loves and frustrations, your work and toil, your hobbies and recreations, they will all have gone.

Hardly anything will remain, except perhaps one or two photographs. Only one thing will matter then. Only one question will be important.

And that is whether you belong eternally to the Lord, whether you're saved or lost. Paul's concern for the Thessalonians, born out of his great love for them, was that they should be saved at the coming of the Lord Jesus.

And he bent all his energies into that great purpose. Let's pray together. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming?

[34 : 33] Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy. Our gracious Father, we thank you so much for the love that Paul had for his Thessalonian friends.

His anxiety to ensure, to play his part to the full in bringing them to eternity, in being used by you to help them to persevere to the end and thus to be saved.

And we pray that you'll give us the same kind of love for others, especially those who are younger in the faith. That you'll help us to work, to labor, to love them, teach them, encourage them, and support them so that many will be brought to be amongst that great multitude that no man can number who are gathered around the throne.

And these things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.