

2 Thessalonians 2:15-3:5

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[0 : 00] I'm grateful to turn to 2 Thessalonians 3, page 990, the passage Paul read earlier. I wonder if the Thessalonians felt like that.

If you're aware of what we've been looking at over the last few weeks, it must have felt like they were losing. They were being persecuted and afflicted, we read in chapter 1. False teachers had come in and disturbed them, shaking their minds, chapter 2, verses 2 and 3, telling them, Jesus has already come back, you've missed it.

So I wonder if they felt like just giving up, like why bother? Why bother doing anything anymore? There's been a lot of talk before the general election, wasn't there, about voter apathy.

People feeling like, it doesn't matter what I vote for, all the same is going to happen anyway, I have no influence in this, I don't care. I wonder if the Thessalonians also felt like that.

Paul, you've been telling us, God is in charge of everything? Does that mean we don't need to do anything? They might have felt apathetic because they felt like they were losing, they might have felt apathetic because if God's in control, does that mean I don't need to do anything?

[1 : 38] There are lots of reasons for them for us to want to give up. Well, Paul is helping them here, he's lifting their eyes. So you may feel like you're losing now, but look at the big picture. God is working his purposes out.

This story has a happy ending for those who trust in Jesus. Lift your eyes. Look at God's purposes. And look at God's character. Did you catch it in, as Emma read it to us, verse 3?

God is faithful. The Lord is faithful. So don't give up. Don't say you don't care. There is a reason to care. Don't fall into apathy through anxiety, through worries.

But instead pursue God's purposes. Because the Lord will win. And he's putting you on his team. That's the good news. But what is God's purpose then?

Before we get into the details of this text, what is God's purpose? What has Paul been saying to them? What has the Bible been telling us about God's purpose? Well, if you turn back to chapter 1 for a moment, we catch a glimpse of it.

[2 : 41] Chapter 1, verse 12, just over the page. Paul has been praying for the Thessalonians. Why? So that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you.

And you in him. According to the grace of God. God's great purpose is his own glory. To bring glory to his Son. Glory to himself. To glorify his people.

As he does that. That is what God is all about. That's what he said back in the Old Testament. Through the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 42, verse 8. He says, I am the Lord.

That is my name. The name, of course, sums up character. As well as just being his name. My glory, I will give it to no other. Nor my praise can't idols.

And a few verses later. Chapter 48, verse 11. For my own sake. For my own sake, I act. For how should my name be profaned? My glory, I will not give to another. God's great purpose in this earth.

[3 : 37] Is to bring glory to himself. Now, I tried to explain that to a neighbor of mine a few weeks ago. Who looked at me and said, isn't that very egocentric? And if we think that's just that little kid who wants to be the center of attention.

Then we do not understand God and his glory. And who we are in relation to him. See, God is a great creator. The whole universe is about him.

It exists for him and by him. The whole thing works for his glory. So if we are not wanting God's glory. Then we're rebelling against the whole purpose for which the universe exists.

Actually, we're not wanting what is best for us. As well as what is best for God and everything he made. Be like someone who's apathetic about their own health.

Says, I don't care. I'm just going to keep drinking too much, keep eating too much. I don't care. Well, that person isn't looking after themselves. It means they're not acting in the way they're designed to act.

[4 : 38] Not looking after their own bodies. It's a fundamental thing that's good for us, isn't it? If we're not doing that, then we're not working in the way we've been designed to work. Even more so, to not want God's glory.

To not want everyone to see how great and magnificent God is. It's to fail to live as we've been designed to live. And it means we'll fail to enjoy what life is really about.

It's like using a kettle as a door wedge. It might work. But it's not what the kettle was designed for. We were designed for God's glory. That is the best thing. That is the right thing.

That is the good thing. So Paul is lifting the Thessalonians' eyes. Saying, look, yes, you're in a battle. Yes, you've got false teachers coming in. Yes, life is hard.

But look, God has this great purpose. He's working his purpose out. And his purpose includes you. It's something you are part of.

[5 : 37] He's made you part of his team. So how do the Thessalonians get involved with God's purposes? How do we get involved with pursuing them? Instead of being apathetic about them? Paul gives two things here.

By praying and persevering. By praying and persevering. Or if you want, by holding out and holding on. So the first way to pursue God's glory. Is there in verse 3.

In verse 1, rather. Of chapter 3. Paul has just been praying for Thessalonians. The last verses of chapter 2. Now he asks them to pray for him. And his co-workers. What does he want prayer for? Finally, brothers, pray for us.

And how does he go on? How does he go on? How would we complete that sentence? Pray for me. I want my health to be better. I want this cough to go. Pray for me.

I've got a difficult time coming up to school with exams. Pray for me. Wisdom in making decisions. What does Paul pray for? Finally, brothers. Pray for us.

[6 : 36] That the word of the Lord may speed ahead. And be honoured. As happened among you. Literally. That the word of the Lord may run. And be honoured. It's a picture from the athletic stadium.

It's a picture of the athlete at the Greek Games. Running and winning. If you think back to the Olympics. And that very Friday night. When Britain won three gold medals. And Mo Farah running around the track.

And the crowd applauding. Cheering him on to victory. Paul says, that's what you're doing for your prayers. Pray that the word of the Lord may run ahead. And be honoured. May run and win.

He's praying that the gospel may triumph. That's what he's wanting. He doesn't care so much for his own safety. For wisdom in his own decisions. For his own health. He wants the gospel to triumph.

He wants it to run and be honoured. That's how Paul's heart is gripped with God's great purposes. Sister Thessalonians join in those purposes. Pray for the gospel's triumph.

[7 : 35] Pray for the gospel's triumph. He's personifying the gospel as an athlete here, isn't he? God's word being like a runner running. That happens a bit in the Old Testament as well.

Psalms 147 verse 15. He, the Lord, sends out his commands to the earth. His word runs swiftly. It's a picture of God's message running through the earth. How's it going to be received?

Well, Paul says, pray that the gospel will triumph. Pray that it will be honoured. So the gospel is God's truth. It brings life where it's believed. That's what he reminded them of back in chapter 2 verses 13 and 14.

And yet, many people believe the lie. They believe the deception instead of God's truth. Because people do not love the truth, Paul says, back in chapter 2 verse 11.

Because they refuse to believe what is true. So in that context, Paul is praying that the gospel will triumph amongst people who do not naturally believe.

[8 : 36] Now what does it look like to pray for the gospel to triumph? What does it look like? Well, there are two sides to the coin, if you like. So in verse 1, Paul wants them to pray that the message will be accepted.

In verse 2, that the messengers will be protected. So let's look at those firstly. Firstly, the gospel message to be accepted. Verse 1, pray for us that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be

honoured, as happened among you.

Back in Acts chapter 17, we read about what happened when Paul turned up at Thessalonica and started preaching. And yes, there was opposition. But yes, people believed. 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, Paul describes it like this.

Verse 5, our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. See, as God set his word forth, it wasn't just his word on his own.

But the spirit of God took that word and made it powerful and effective in the lives of these Thessalonians. See, the Lord was pursuing his purpose of saving people for his glory.

[9 : 47] See, over the last year, we've heard a lot about the Ebola virus, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. And it's right to be concerned about that. It's right to want to have a cure for that virus, want to have a vaccination against it, and to send medical help to get there.

But there is a deeper virus, a bigger, more dangerous virus, that is endemic in this world. It affects every human being that has ever been born.

It's the virus of sin. The virus that turns us against our maker. And there is one cure. And that is the gospel of our God and Savior.

This message that Paul is praying, urging the Thessalonians to pray, will run swiftly through the world and triumph. He's the only cure for this virus.

So Paul is saying, pray that this gospel message will be accepted. Just how he reminds them of how they accepted it, how it came to them. That they honoured it. That the gospel came to be speed ahead and be honoured, as happened among you.

[10 : 49] See, that experience, that experience of receiving God's good news, of receiving the life and forgiveness and freedom that comes through it, should be an incentive for the Thessalonians to pray.

If you look at websites, things like Amazon, people always want you to write reviews when something good is happening. Yeah, this is a great product, great book, buy this book. It's the opposite, when it's not been good. Paul says you can do something more fundamental than writing a review.

You can pray that the gospel will be honoured, that the gospel message will be accepted amongst other people. So that's the first aspect of praying for the gospel to triumph.

Pray for the message to be accepted. But also, that message needs legs, doesn't it? It needs messengers to take it. So Paul asks for prayer that the messengers be protected.

Look at verse 2. We pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not all have faith. Now that word translated wicked there, it's a very unusual word.

[11 : 52] It is literally a word that means out of place. I was looking at the BBC website this afternoon to see what was happening in the world. And I don't know if you know, but the big floods in Tbilisi in Georgia.

And one of the effects of the floods is that some of the animals have escaped from the jail. No, from the zoo. That's not bad, isn't it? So there are pictures on the BBC website of this hippo roaming through the streets of Tbilisi.

That is an animal that is out of place. It's not where it belongs. And if you know anything about hippos, I used to live in Kenya, so I know anything about hippos. You don't want them out of place. They are more dangerous than the lions and the tigers. They kill more people in Africa every year than lions do. So an out of place hippo is dangerous. Paul wants to be protected from out of place people.

And wicked people. Who are these out of place people? Well, in the context of the letter, the out of place people are those who are part of the church, but do not have genuine faith.

[12 : 55] So back in chapter 2, verse 2, the Thessalonians have been disturbed by false teaching. In chapter 2, Paul and Colombs describe the great rebellion, literally the great apostasy, where many will, who are apparently members of the church, will leave, because they will believe, false teaching instead of the truth.

So it seems that out of place people, wicked people, as our translation puts it, are those who are in the church, but not actually true believers.

John Calvin called them the treacherous men who lurked in the church under the name of Christians. They are evil because they're against God's purposes.

They're doing the work of the evil one instead. So that's what Paul is asking for prayer for, particularly. Prayer to be protected from those who aren't true believers.

Not all have faith, he says at the end of verse 2. Now if you're not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, let me make it very clear, you are very welcome here tonight. I'm so glad you're here. And if anything I say, we have questions, or you just want to scream and shout, please do question me, please do come and scream and shout at me.

[14:05] It's great to have you here. Paul has no concern about that. What he does have to say is that those who claim to be believers, and get into the church, and kind of infiltrate it, and divert it from its gospel cause.

It's nearly 300 years ago, and those in charge of the Church of England at the time prevented the likes of John Wesley and George Whitefield from preaching in churches. They didn't want the gospel preached.

Those leaders were out of place people. We see that today, don't we, in many denominations and churches. People who rise positions of power, and then restrict the gospel being preached. They do it through, perhaps through distraction from the gospel focus. They do it through dilution of gospel commitment in local churches. Too busy doing other things, other activities, not wanting the gospel preached.

They can do it through disrupting gospel unity, arguing about secondary issues, or other things. Or by bringing gospel witness into disrepute. By bearing the name of a Christian, yet living in such a way that other people look on and say, if that's what Christianity is, I don't want any part of it.

[15:13] Paul wants the Thessalonians to pray to be protected from those kind of people. We need to pray that the Lord will protect us from those kind of people as well.

Don't we? So, praying for the gospel to triumph is praying that the gospel message will be accepted, praying that gospel messengers will be protected.

But some might sit here and say, well, if God is sovereign, if God is working out his purposes, then why do we need to pray? What's the point of that? In fact, this is one of the great arguments that the late great Christopher Hitchens used in his final book, a collection of essays called *Mortality*, as he was dying with cancer.

And he said, why is it Christians say they're going to pray for me? Why pray so that God has already determined what's going to happen? That's utterly pointless. He ridicules the whole thing. But there is a reason for praying.

So it's there. If you look at verse 1, a word we easily skip over. Finally, brothers, pray for us that, literally, in order that, the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured, as happened among you.

[16:25] We pray it for that purpose. Why? Because prayer is the means that God has ordained, the means that God has planned for his gospel message to spread ahead, to speed ahead.

You're involved in God's purposes, Paul says. Lift your eyes. Get on board with those purposes. Pursue God's purposes by praying that the gospel will triumph.

Because that is the means God uses to bring people to himself. As happened on you, Thessalonians. So that's the first thing. Pursue God's glory by praying for the gospel's triumph. Then secondly, pursue God's glory by persevering in God's truth. Look at that in verses 3 to 5. How is it possible to persevere in the truth, anyway?

When there's false teaching in the church. When there's persecution upon the church. When many are turning away from the truth. That was the kind of context the Thessalonians were living in.

[17:22] How could they persevere in the truth? How can we persevere in the truth in our day? When believing the gospel is a ridiculous thing. Believing any truth is a preposterous idea in our society.

Well, how is it possible? Well, look at verse 3. Which if you catch the contrast, anyway, between the end of verse 2 and the beginning of verse 3. Not all have faith, Paul says. But then verse 3. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you.

Yes, there might be unfaithful people in the church. There might be people who desert and believe for false teaching. But Paul says, don't worry about them. Because God is faithful.

The unfaithfulness of people can never overturn God's faithfulness. The Lord will always remain faithful to his people. To his great covenant promises and purposes. So do you see where Paul's

confidence is about them?

[18 : 22] He's not confident because they're strong characters. He's not confident because they've read the right books. He's not confident because they had influence. Paul is confident about their response to this letter.

Because the Lord is faithful. He specifically mentions three things the Lord does in his faithfulness for his people. So first, he establishes them.

He establishes them. Paul already said that. There you go. Confidence in you. The Lord will establish you, verse 3, and guard you against the evil one.

Back in chapter 2, verse 17, Paul had prayed that the Lord would establish their every good work and deed and word. That's what the Lord does. Builds them up.

Last year, when the fence place around our house or around our house but in our garden blew down and needed to be fixed and re-established. Now thankfully, I didn't do that on my own. If I did, it would have fallen down again by now.

[19 : 23] But my neighbor, two dollars down here as a surveyor, came and helped me do it. And that fence is now thankfully up. And so it is. Just as Paul helped me establish that, my neighbor Paul, helped me establish that.

So the Lord will establish their good work, their works, and words. He'll establish them in the faith. The second thing the Lord does is guard them.

Verse 3, he establishes you and guards you against the evil one. In the context of this book, the primary way the Lord is going to guard them or the primary way the evil one is attacking is through false teaching as well as secondary through persecution.

Paul says, the Lord will guard you in the midst of that. You have a powerful enemy but we have powerful protection of the living God. He establishes, he guards, and then he directs.

Look at verse 5. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. Literally Paul is praying the Lord will clear the way for their steadfastness and love.

[20 : 26] He'll redirect their hearts towards love and steadfastness. Away from selfishness and fear so they can remain steadfast or endure. When Paul talks about directing to the love of God that could mean directing their hearts to God's love for them.

In other words, Paul will be praying that God will enable them to love each other as God loves them. That is possible. Or it could mean Paul is talking about the Thessalonians' love for God.

If they love God they will love his truth. If the Lord is directing their hearts to love him they will love his truth. If they love his truth they will not believe the false teaching that's going on. That's being contrasted to the people in chapter 2 verse 10 who are perishing because they refuse to love the truth.

So either way whether it's directing our hearts to love each other as God loves us or directing our hearts to love God and therefore love his truth. Either way, it's something we all need isn't it?

It's something we all need. That God would direct us to take all the rubbish out of the way that stops us doing those things. Now similarly with directing our hearts to the perseverance of Christ and steadfastness of Christ that could mean one of two things.

[21 : 41] It could either mean the steadfastness that Christ had as one who endured mocking and hostility even to the cross in which case Paul's praying that they will persevere and have steadfastness like Christ did throughout all his ministry.

Or it could mean steadfastness for Christ enduring waiting for the Lord Jesus to come back. And given what Paul had said in chapter 1 how he commended in chapter 1 verse 4 their steadfastness in all their persecutions and afflictions.

I think that is probably what he's talking about here. He's praying the Lord will direct their hearts to endure to wait patiently to be steadfast until the Lord Jesus comes back.

Until that great day when their enemies are squashed and smitten beneath his feet and they marvel at the Lord Jesus and are glorified in him and with him.

So this is how they can persevere. It's how we can persevere. Because the Lord establishes us guards us and directs our hearts. So these are resources the Lord gives us.

[22 : 50] And what does it practically mean to respond to use those resources to appropriate them by faith? Well look at verse 4. Look at what the command is here. We have confidence in the Lord about you that you are doing and will do the things that we command.

And what did Paul command them to do? We're back to verse 15 of the previous chapter for a moment just over the page. So then brothers stand firm and hold to the traditions that you are taught by us either by our spoken word or by our letter.

For the traditions of the gospel message lots of human traditions or church traditions but the gospel message the true gospel message they heard. So the command is to stand firm in those things. Keep holding to God's truth. Hold on to it. Yes, hold it out to the world in your prayers. Hold on to it in your lies. Don't let it go. Don't dilute it. Don't relativise it.

Don't diminish it. Just believe it. And holding on to that truth isn't just an intellectual thing. It's not just continuing to assent to a certain set of doctrines although it's not less than that but it's more than that.

[23 : 58] It means having the truth in our heads loving it in our hearts living it out with our hands and our lies is what we do. And you can see that it involves living it out because that's Paul's very next command we'll come on to you next week.

Verse 6 We command you brothers in the name of our Lord that you keep away from any brother who's walking in idleness. In other words holding to truth has implications in our lives in the way we live.

But here's Paul's command pursue God's glory by holding on to God's truth. And as always what God commands God enables. What God commands God enables.

He establishes He protects He guards He directs He is the one who gives us all we need to persevere. And when you've got the resources to do something it gives you motivation to do it doesn't it?

I would like to claim that the reason I never cut our hedge is because I don't really have a good ladder or a good hedge trimmer thing. Now if anyone lends me a big ladder and a good hedge trimmer these guys don't want to know because I don't really want to go up there.

[25 : 09] But she's another illustration. My wife has been invited to an event in Hungary in August. Now if she had to drive the thousand miles from here a thousand miles of what Google tells me it is to Hungary it might put her off.

If she had to pay for an expensive hotel when she got there it would certainly put me off. But as it is it's all paid for when she gets there. And actually flights from Luton are pretty cheap.

So guess what? She's motivated to go and I'm motivated for her to go. So when you've got the resources to enable you to do something it naturally gives them motivation to want to do it doesn't it?

That's how Paul can command them to stand firm holding on to the truth because God has given them all the resources and all the motivation they need to do so. And so it is with us.

God calls us to persevere. He guards us. He establishes us. He protects us. So surely knowing that we will want to hold on to his truth hold it in our heads not changing the truth we need to.

[26 : 16] Holding it in our hearts loving the truth loving the God who has brought us and saved us. Living it out in our lives by his grace. Paul says don't be apathetic.

Pursue God's purposes by holding out the word by praying the gospel will triumph and by holding on to God's truth by persevering in God's truth. Don't be apathetic.

There's a song in our car at the moment and a CD in our car. My mum for the son was doing this I was quite two weeks running I can't believe it. If only I had an enemy bigger than my apathy. If only I had an enemy bigger than my apathy.

I know that sums up so much of our culture around us doesn't it? People can't really bother with very much. Yet Paul says lift your eyes look at God's great purposes. He's working it all out for his glory.

You get to share in that glory. So don't be apathetic. Don't give up. Pursue God's purposes by praying for your gospel to triumph and by persevering in his truth.

[27 : 23] You have all the resources you need. Go for it says Paul. Let's pray together.