

Friends Forever

(1 Thess. 2:13–3:13)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Thess. 2:13–3:13; Rom. 9:1–5; 11:1–12, 24–32; Matt. 24:9–22; 10:42.*

Memory Text: “May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones” (*1 Thessalonians 3:13, NIV*).

Key Thought: Paul continues to praise the Thessalonians for the good things he sees in them and to encourage them amid the persecution they are facing.

There is a deep, emotional bond between Paul and the Thessalonians. Paul stresses that bond as he seeks to continue reinforcing in their minds the love that he has for them. While certainly sincere, his words will also help prepare them for the criticism that will soon follow.

Paul begins and ends this section with a prayer. In a sense the entire passage is written with prayer in mind. The underlying theme of this focus on prayer is Paul's desire for the Thessalonians to be “blameless and holy” (*1 Thess. 3:13; see also 1 Thess. 2:19, 20*) at the second coming of Jesus.

The friendship Paul has with them is deeper than earthly friendships; it is a friendship that goes beyond the boundaries of time and history on this earth. Paul is looking forward to spending eternity with the Thessalonian believers. This desire, in part, is what drives his intense concern throughout the letter about their beliefs and behavior. Paul loves these people and wants them to be ready for the return of Christ.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 11.*

The Judean Example (1 Thess. 2:13–16)

On the surface, 1 Thessalonians 2:13–16 reads like a digression from the previous themes of pleasing God and caring for the new believers (*1 Thess. 2:1–12*). But verse 13 continues the theme of how the Thessalonians responded to the apostles and the gospel that they brought to Thessalonica.

With verse 14, Paul returns to the theme of imitation. The persecution in Thessalonica echoed the earlier persecution of Christians in Judea. Some Jews persecuted Jewish Christians in Judea, while Gentile and Jewish neighbors together persecuted the largely Gentile Christian population of Thessalonica. Here Paul shows that the persecution of Christians is tied to a larger pattern. Those who follow Christ are going to face opposition, even persecution.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16. What message should this passage have for us today? What does it definitely not teach?

Here Paul reveals his feelings about a specific group of Jews who dogged his evangelistic trail from place to place, sowing discord and opposition to the apostles. Passages in the Bible like this (*see also Matt. 23:29–38*) have been grossly perverted and twisted in order to “justify” persecution of Jewish people. But that kind of universal application goes way beyond Paul’s intention here. Paul is speaking specifically about the Judean authorities (the word translated as “Jews” in 1 Thessalonians 2:14 also can be translated as “Judeans”) who collaborated with the Romans in the death of Jesus and who made it their business to obstruct the preaching of the gospel wherever and whenever they could. In fact, Paul seems to be echoing what Jesus already said about those who were trying to kill Him (*Matt. 23:29–36*).

We must keep in mind that Paul himself was a Jew. He was not vilifying an entire class of people. Jesus was Jewish. The first disciples were Jewish. Jews alone formed the early core of the church. As far as Paul was concerned, every Jew he met, such as Silas, Barnabas, and Timothy, was potentially a friend for eternity (*see Rom. 9:1–5; 11:1–12, 24–32*).

Every person on earth is a soul “for whom Christ died” (*Rom. 14:15, 1 Cor. 8:11*). Prejudice against whole classes of people is not appropriate among those who live at the foot of the Cross.

It’s easy to point fingers at the church for failure in regard to how it has treated whole classes of people. What about ourselves? How much ethnic prejudice lingers in our own hearts?

Paul's Hope and Joy (1 Thess. 2:17–20)

In the fourteen verses that run from 1 Thessalonians 2:17 through 3:10, Paul offers a chronological account of his separation from the Thessalonian believers. The theme of friendship runs throughout the passage. These Thessalonians are not just Paul's parishioners; they are truly friends. The entire passage pulses with deep emotion.

Paul wants all of his later advice to, and criticism of, the church (*in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5*) to be read in light of his love and concern for its members. And because of this love, he has earned the right to counsel the church there. The giving of advice is best received when it is grounded in love.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17–20. What is Paul saying here that's so relevant to us today?

The main verb of verse 17 (usually translated as “being taken” or “torn away”) is rooted in the concept of being orphaned. When Paul is forced to leave Thessalonica suddenly, he feels the loss of relationship as deeply as if his parents had just died. He wants very much to visit the Thessalonians because he misses them dearly. They are absent in person but not in heart. He blames this delay on Satan, his words here being another text in the Bible that shows the reality of the great controversy.

Paul's longing for the Thessalonian believers, however, is rooted in more than just everyday relationship; it has an end-time focus. Paul looks forward to “showing them off” to Jesus after the Second Coming. They are the validation of his ministry for Christ, his eschatological joy and boast! Paul wants there to be evidence at the end that his life has made a difference in the lives of others.

What this passage should show us, too, is that we need to keep our priorities straight. Our existence here is but a “vapor” (*James 4:14, NKJV*); yet, it is vapor with eternal consequences. Paul's focus, Paul's priority, is on what is eternal, on what has lasting value and importance. After all, if you really think about the ultimate fate of this world, what else really matters other than the salvation of the lost?

How should all that we do in this life impact, to one degree or another, the salvation of the lost? However nice it is to talk about this ideal, how do we *live* in accordance with this objective?

Timothy's Substitute Visit (1 Thess. 3:1–5)

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:1–5 and Matthew 24:9–22. In what larger context does Paul see the sufferings of the Thessalonians and himself?

Paul is so distressed about his absence from the Thessalonians that he decides to forgo the companionship of Timothy in Athens in order to get firsthand news of the Thessalonians' situation. His intense longing for them leads him to prefer being without Timothy rather than being without news of how they are faring.

Because Timothy's mission is to be a substitute, or stand-in, for Paul, Paul does his best to boost Timothy's authority with the church. Timothy is Paul's "brother," a "minister of God," and a "coworker in the gospel." Some Greek manuscripts go so far as to call Timothy a "coworker of God." This would be extremely high praise. Paul knows that the mission will be a difficult one, and he does his best to open the way so that Timothy will be received as if Paul himself had come.

Verses 3 and 4 give us an idea of what Paul would have said to the Thessalonians had he been able to visit them. The specific word chosen to describe their sufferings is typical of end-time passages, such as in Matthew 24:9–22. Affliction should not come as a surprise. We all have been warned about it.

Christian suffering calls to mind the events of the end, during which time all true followers of Christ will face persecution (*see Rev. 13:14–17*). When suffering actually comes, we should see it as a fulfillment of prophecy and an encouragement rather than a discouragement. The purpose of prophecy is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future but to provide solid assurance amid the challenges we face every day.

In verse 5, Paul reveals that he has an additional motive for sending Timothy. He is worried that the difficult things the Thessalonians have experienced might have resulted in their loss of faith. He is worried that his mission to Thessalonica might somehow have been in vain or empty of results.

What are things we can do, day by day, to prepare ourselves spiritually for the inevitable trials that life brings us?

The Result of Timothy's Visit (1 Thess. 3:6–10)

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6–8. Timothy was sent to encourage the Thessalonians. What aspects of Timothy's report brought joy and encouragement to Paul? That is, what did Timothy see in the Thessalonians that Paul thought was so good?

The “but now” of verse 6 is very emphatic. Paul did not waste any time before sitting down to write to the Thessalonians. The instant he got the news from Timothy, he immediately wrote 1 Thessalonians.

What do we learn about Paul's prayer life from 1 Thessalonians 3: 9, 10? What can we take from that for ourselves?

The absence of words such as *always* and *constantly* (see 1 Thess. 1:2) suggests there was something new in Paul's joy and thanksgiving here beyond the constant joy and thanksgiving that he always felt when he prayed for the Thessalonians. The joy and thanksgiving in 1 Thessalonians 3:9, 10 is in immediate reaction to Timothy's news.

What was lacking in the Thessalonians' faith (1 Thess. 3:10)? The immediate text doesn't say. As we can see later, Paul's concern for their faith was more practical than theological. Chapters 4 and 5 indicate that they needed to bring their practice in line with their belief. Though they had love and faith and were “standing firm in the Lord,” it becomes apparent later in the letter that they still had some important growing to do.

Why is prayer so important in our own walk with the Lord? How much time do you spend in prayer? What does your answer tell you about how important you deem it? In what ways can you strengthen your prayer life?

Paul's Renewed Prayers (1 Thess. 3:11–13)

The second coming of Jesus is a powerful incentive for spiritual growth. Every act of abuse or oppression will be brought to justice. Every act of love or kindness will be recognized and rewarded (*see, for example, Matt. 10:42*). That means that every act in this life, no matter how small, has meaning in the ultimate scheme of things.

But equally important for Paul, and the emphasis in this week's lesson, is that the Second Coming will be a glorious reunion of family and friends, whose relationships will last forever because of what Jesus has done. Christian relationships do not have an expiration date. They are designed to last forever.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13. What are the things that Paul includes in his prayers for the Thessalonians after the arrival of Timothy?

First Thessalonians 3:11–13 sounds almost like the benediction at the end of a worship service. Paul, of course, wishes to return to Thessalonica and make up the deficits in the church's faith (*1 Thess. 3:10*). But even if he is not able to return, he can still plead with God to motivate and grow the Thessalonians into an abundance of love, not only for each other but also for their neighbors and everyone they meet. This love will be an important component of their characters when Jesus returns.

Somewhat puzzling is Paul's comment in verse 13 that Jesus will come "with all his saints." The words *saints* and *holy ones* are normally applied to human beings in the New Testament. On the other hand, Second Coming texts in the New Testament normally describe Jesus as accompanied by angels rather than human beings (*Matt. 24:30, 31; Mark 8:38; 13:27*). So, who are the "saints" in this verse?

The solution to this problem is to recognize that in verse 13 Paul adopted the language of Zechariah 14:5 and applied it to the second coming of Jesus. The "holy ones" in the Old Testament are best understood as angels (*see also Deut. 33:2 and Dan. 7:10*). The New Testament, on the other hand, gives the word *saints* new meaning: they are human beings whose righteousness is from Jesus. In 1 Thessalonians 3:13, however, Paul reverts to the Old Testament definition of the word *saints* as angelic beings who stand in the presence of God. As such, they will accompany the God-man Jesus when He returns to earth.

Further Study: “The arrival of Silas and Timothy from Macedonia, during Paul’s sojourn in Corinth, had greatly cheered the apostle. They brought him ‘good tidings’ of the ‘faith and charity’ of those who had accepted the truth during the first visit of the gospel messengers to Thessalonica. Paul’s heart went out in tender sympathy toward these believers, who, in the midst of trial and adversity, had remained true to God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 255.

“True, heaven-born love is not selfish and changeable. It is not dependent on human praise. The heart of him who receives the grace of God overflows with love for God and for those for whom Christ died. Self is not struggling for recognition. He does not love others because they love and please him, because they appreciate his merits, but because they are Christ’s purchased possession. If his motives, words, or actions are misunderstood or misrepresented, he takes no offense, but pursues the even tenor of his way. He is kind and thoughtful, humble in his opinion of himself, yet full of hope, always trusting in the mercy and love of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 101, 102.

Discussion Questions:

- ① In *Christ’s Object Lessons* and in many other places, Ellen White uses the phrase “souls for whom Christ died.” How widely should that phrase be applied? To every human being on earth? Or only to fellow believers in Christ? If Christ truly died for all, then why are not all saved?
- ② How important is previous relationship when it comes to giving advice or criticism to a fellow believer? What can we learn about this from Paul’s example in this week’s passage? What can we learn from this that can help us in our ministry to others?
- ③ Paul’s love and concern for the believers in Thessalonica is very apparent. This love mirrors the love that Jesus revealed when He was here in the flesh. Love is such a powerful component in the softening of hearts and the opening up of people to the grace of God. How can we learn to love others more than we already do? How can we better learn to reveal that love, as well?

Summary: In 1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:13 Paul describes the events and emotions of the period between the time he was forced to leave Thessalonica and when Timothy arrives in Corinth with news about the church. The central emphasis of the chapter is Paul’s deep bond with the Thessalonian believers.

Finding the Way Home: Part 1

Verusca's brothers had become Seventh-day Adventists and often talked about their new faith. Verusca knew that what her brothers told her was probably true, but she wanted no part of a church that didn't allow dancing or drinking or other things that she enjoyed. But her brothers wouldn't take a hint; they kept talking to her about their faith.

Marques, one of her brothers' friends, often visited the family's home. He talked about God, too, and invited Verusca to study the Bible with him. Verusca wasn't interested in studying the Bible, but Marques kept asking. Eventually Verusca agreed to study the Bible with him. She noticed that Marques was passionate about God. Verusca discovered that she enjoyed hearing about God.

After several months of studying together, Marques asked Verusca to attend evangelistic meetings with him. Verusca declined. Marques invited her again and again, and still she refused. But finally she decided to go.

Verusca attended several of the meetings, but she resisted the calls to surrender her life to God. Then Verusca realized that she couldn't run from God. She thought of how angry her mother had been when her brothers had become Seventh-day Adventists. What would happen when Mother learned that she, too, was thinking of becoming a Seventh-day Adventist?

Early on Sabbath morning Verusca awoke and dressed, hoping to slip out of the house before her mother saw her and asked questions. But her mother saw her.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'm going to church," Verusca said, unwilling to lie.

"Which church?" her mother asked.

"The Seventh-day Adventist church," Verusca answered.

"If you go, don't come back!" her mother said angrily. Verusca's courage failed, and she changed clothes and sat outside and cried. Her brother saw her and said softly, "Mom can't save you; only God can." Then he left.

Verusca's mind was in turmoil. She recalled Bible texts Marques had read to her about leaving family to follow God. Her brother's words, *only God can save you*, ran through her mind.

Verusca ran to her room and dressed for church. As she walked out the door, her mother said, "Take your things, and don't come back."

"Now what?" Verusca asked herself. She had no money and no place to go if her mother turned her away. Her father wasn't interested in religion and didn't care what she did.

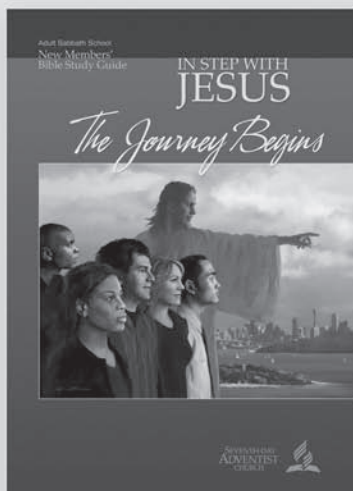
(Continued next week)

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