

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 was 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 them. 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 them 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 their 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 growth that needed to be done.

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:

- ❶ In *Christ’s Object Lessons* (today’s Further Study), 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?
- ❷ 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?
- ❸ 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.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:13*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Realize that genuine faith in Christ creates caring relationships among fellow believers that will last for eternity.

Feel: Experience the encouragement and support that comes from close spiritual relationships.

Do: Decide to be more intentional about investing time in the building of relationships with fellow believers.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Called to Community

A God’s plan to redeem the world has always been accompanied by an invitation for those who want to follow Him to become part of His community of believers, whether that community be the family of Abraham, the nation of Israel, or the church. What does this indicate about the importance that God places on experiencing community with fellow believers?

B The apostle Paul refers several times to the church as the “body of Christ” (*Rom. 12:3–8, 1 Cor. 12:12–31, Eph. 4:1–16*). What does this metaphor, or comparison, reveal about the kind of relationships that believers should experience together?

II. Feel: The Need for Community

A What illustrations do you see in nature, our culture, or the world, in general, that indicate life is best when lived in relationship with others?

B What are the blessings that come from unhindered community? Conversely, what problems do we experience when community is disrupted?

III. Do: Building Community

A How strong are the relationships within your church? What could you do to strengthen these relationships?

► **Summary:** For Christianity to live up to its God-given potential, it must be experienced in genuine, loving community with fellow believers.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Paul’s concern for the spiritual well-being of the believers in Thessalonica illustrates the bonds of fellowship and close friendship that unite the lives of God’s followers.

Just for Teachers: In this week’s lesson we consider the stories and metaphors in Scripture that highlight the importance that God places on the development of communities of faith, defined not only by communion with God but by close communion and friendship between God’s followers.

Between 1955 and 1965, an American psychologist named Harry Harlow conducted a series of social-isolation tests on baby monkeys for up to a year. The monkeys were separated from their mothers at birth and were prevented from developing any other relationships. The monkeys were divided into two groups. The first group experienced partial isolation by growing up in individual wire cages. The second group, however, experienced total isolation from any other living being. Then, at various periods of times, some of the test monkeys were introduced to other monkeys. The results of the test were shocking.

While no monkey died during isolation, every single monkey developed severe psychological problems due to lack of socialization. When the monkeys were introduced to society, they routinely experienced emotional shock characterized by behaviors such as self-clutching, rocking, and the inability to form normal social relationships. For some the shock was so overwhelming that they refused to eat and eventually died. The autopsy report listed the cause of death as emotional anorexia. Depending on the length of their isolation, some monkeys experienced a limited recovery, with one exception: the tests determined that twelve months of isolation virtually eliminated any chance of the monkeys recovering socially.—Harry F. Harlow et al., “Total Social Isolation in Monkeys,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 54, no. 1 (1965), pp. 90, 92, 94.

While the tests conducted by Dr. Harlow are certainly troubling, the results should not really be that surprising. The creation story makes it clear that God placed within all His creatures—whether humans, birds, or animals—a need for fellowship and community with one another.

Consider This: After creating Adam, God said it was not good for man

to be alone (*Gen. 2:18*). Why are relationships so important? Why was it not good for Adam to be alone?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. The Destroyer of Community (*Review 1 Thessalonians 2:17–20 with the class.*)

According to Luke, Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica came to an abrupt end when the accusations of a group of angry Jews prompted the city authorities to ban Paul from Thessalonica. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul refers to the same event, but he views it from a different perspective. The source of the problem that was hindering Paul’s return to Thessalonica was not a city ordinance or a group of infuriated Jews. No, according to Paul, the problem was due to the workings of Satan. He was the ultimate source behind all these events. While Paul refers to Satan only a few times in his letters, his reference here is important because it points to the presence of the great controversy that is being waged behind the scenes of earth’s history. In particular, we see here Satan’s efforts to hinder the community between God’s followers.

From the moment that humans were created, Satan has schemed and plotted to undermine God’s plan for His people to dwell together in unhindered community with Him and one another. He succeeded in the beginning by turning Adam and Eve against God and then against each other. And ever since that fatal day in Eden, Satan has sought to undermine God’s plan to restore those broken relationships. Because Satan knows that when God’s followers dwell together in unity there is a tremendous power for good, it should be no surprise that Satan works particularly hard at causing separation, division, alienation, and hostility between God’s people. Of course, Satan should not get all the blame for this. Since sin itself now infects the entire human race, we are far too often willing to further his malicious plans without his prompting.

Consider This: What stories in the Bible highlight Satan’s relentless attempt to undermine and destroy the relationships between the followers of God? In those stories, how is God’s grace revealed actively at work repairing and healing what is broken?

II. Paul’s Longing for Fellowship (*Review 1 Thessalonians 3:1–13 with the class.*)

Have you ever felt isolated and alone in a group of people you didn’t

really know or feel comfortable with, wishing that you had at least one close friend to keep you company? That is apparently how the apostle Paul felt in Athens after deciding to send Timothy back to Thessalonica to check on the new converts. While it's difficult to correlate all the events in Acts with those in 1 Thessalonians, it appears that when Timothy left for Thessalonica, Silas had not caught up with Paul yet. That reunion would not take place until Paul arrived in Corinth some time later (*compare Acts 17:15, 18:5*). This meant that Paul once again found himself alone in an idolatrous city, bereft of any Christian fellowship—a situation he did not particularly enjoy (*Acts 17:16*). As uncomfortable as it was for Paul, he was willing to make the sacrifice, longing to hear news about his friends in Thessalonica.

Paul had three things he wanted Timothy to do for him—three things that, incidentally, should be present in every Christian relationship. First, Paul wanted Timothy to “establish and exhort” (*1 Thess. 3:2, ESV*) the Thessalonians in their faith. The word for establish means “to make firm” or “to support.” The word *exhort* literally means to encourage someone by coming along beside him or her, to support him or her. Since Paul couldn't travel to Thessalonica, he wanted Timothy to do what he desperately wanted to do himself. He wanted him to speak words of encouragement and support that would help the young believers hold on to their faith in Jesus during the difficult times they were facing. But even more than that, Paul also wanted Timothy to find out personal details about how they were doing. What had happened in his absence? How were they holding up? And how were they dealing with temptation? Strengthening, supporting, and caring about the life experiences of others: these are three of the basic building blocks of the relationships that God wants His followers to experience together.

Consider This: Strong encouraging relationships between believers are part of God's plan to overcome the power of sin in this world and in our lives. What makes these kinds of relationships so powerful?

►STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

- 1 What examples do we have in Scripture that illustrate the type of strong spiritual relationships God wants His people to experience?
- 2 What can we learn about the relationships that Paul experienced from the list of personal greetings and names of individuals in the last chapter of Romans? As you consider this list, make sure to note as much as you can about the gender, ethnicity, and occupation of each individual.

3 Based on Paul’s comments in 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13, what should be the ultimate goal of the relationships between believers?

Application Questions:

1 While Paul spent much of his life on the road, the lists of personal names scattered throughout his letters indicate that he had a close personal relationship with all kinds of people. How many people do you “really” know in your church? What could you do to get to know people better?

2 Paul’s comments in 1 Thessalonians 3:10 indicate that prayer for our friends is another essential element in the type of relationships God wants us to have with fellow believers. Who are you praying for in your church, and how has prayer increased your faith, as well as the faith and spiritual life of those for whom you pray?

3 What could you do in your church to help to encourage the development of strong Christian relationships between its members?

► STEP 4—Create

Activity: Share with your class the following portion of the famous meditation written by the deeply religious English poet John Donne (1572–1631). After reading it, ask your class what it says about life, death, and community. Does the author go too far in what he claims, or is his perspective right on target? Discuss in light of this week’s lesson.

“The church is . . . universal, so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and ingrafted into the body whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me: all mankind is of one author, and is one volume. . . . No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were: any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.”—John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press, 1959), pp. 107–109.