

**Paul's Love for the Thessalonians**

**1 Thess. 2:17-3:13**

**Background:** Acts 17:1-9 tells the story of Paul's preaching in Thessalonica, resulting in a number of Jews and Gentiles accepting Jesus as Messiah. However, after only a few weeks the non-believing Jews used their influence to turn the city officials against Paul and the new Christians, accusing them of being disloyal to the emperor. (After all, they were proclaiming Jesus as king.) So Paul, Silas, and Timothy had to leave the city long before the new Christians had a chance to develop a mature faith. Paul was extremely worried that these new believers might give up their faith in the face of opposition and persecution. Acts 17:15 relates that Paul was taken to Athens, where he was left alone for a few weeks or months until Silas and Timothy could join him.

**Text:** 1 Thess. 2:17-3:13 is fairly straightforward and easy to understand. In 2:17-20 Paul uses the language of family, not only calling the Thessalonians "brothers (and sisters)" but also speaking of being "orphaned" (2:17) from them. His "intense longing" led him to attempt more than once to visit them, but Satan blocked his way. How Satan blocked his way (and how Paul knew Satan was at work) is unclear. Some think that the officials at Thessalonica would not let Paul re-enter the town, while others think that Paul may have had an illness that prevented his travel. We simply do not know. Paul finishes this little section by telling the new converts again how much he loves them, this time stressing the pride and joy he will feel when he presents them to Jesus at his second coming.

In 3:1-5 Paul states that he simply couldn't stand it any longer—he just had to know how they were doing. He was so worried about the spiritual health of the Thessalonians that he consented to being left alone in Athens (a situation he really hated), sending Timothy in his place. (Why Timothy could go to Thessalonica and not Paul is unknown.) Even though he had already told them that Christians should expect persecution, he was concerned that they might stray from the faith. He sent Timothy, because he couldn't live with the thought that "the tempter" had defeated his new converts. He needed Timothy to strengthen them and to bring him word about how they were doing.

In 3:6-10 Paul writes that Timothy has returned and brought him the wonderful news that his children have stood strong in the faith and still have fond memories and love for him. He then tells them he is so filled with joy that "now we really live." Paul is very much like parents whose life is good when their children are doing well and whose life is troubled when their children are troubled. He finishes this short section by informing them again how much time he spends in prayer over them, thanking God for the great joy he has because of them and praying for an opportunity to return to further instruct them.

3:11-13 returns to and finishes the prayer begun in 1:1. He prays for God the Father and the Lord Jesus to overcome Satan's obstacles to his returning to Thessalonica. He finishes by praying for their love, strength, and holiness in anticipation of the return of Jesus.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. The "family" metaphor that is so central to Paul's teaching (and that of almost all New Testament writers) is a powerful one. In what ways did the NT writers think that Christians should be like a family? Are there ways in which the metaphor should not be pushed too far? How might a greater sense of family enhance our community life?

2. For the third straight week we are studying a section in which Paul talks about Christians suffering. So perhaps a good question is, "Do we hear much these days of the 'health and wealth' gospel?" What do you think about it? Is there any truth to it whatsoever? Given what he says in 1 Thessalonians, how might Paul react to such teaching?

3. Sometimes Paul seems to be very headstrong and forceful (see Galatians and 1 Corinthians, for example). Yet at other times he appears more of a big softie, such as this letter of 1 Thessalonians. How do we reconcile his toughness and his gentleness?

4. Paul finishes his prayer section at the end of chapter 3. He is clearly filled with joy because of the faith and perseverance of the Thessalonians. How does our prayer life affect our moods and ability to face troubles? And how does the success of Christians that we are caring for allow us to "really live" (3:8)?

5. Paul writes of being blocked by Satan from visiting these new Christians. How do you think he knew that Satan was blocking him? In Acts 16:7 the Spirit of Jesus would not allow Paul to evangelize a certain region. How do we know when Satan is blocking our efforts and when God may be blocking our efforts?