

# Paul's Concern for the Thessalonians

## A study of 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

By Mike Morrison

**P**aul, Silas and Timothy had been chased out of Macedonia, but they did not abandon the infant churches they left behind. Indeed, they were worried because the new believers in Thessalonica were being persecuted. Paul did not know how they would cope.

### Paul's desire to see the Thessalonians (2:17-20)

Paul reviews the history of his relationship with the people: **But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.** Paul does not say *how* he tried to return to Thessalonica, but the person who carried the letter could explain the details.

**For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us.** Again, the letter carrier would fill in the details that we lack. It might have been risky to put them in writ-

ing, in case the letter was intercepted.

Paul explains that he takes pride in the Thessa-

Paul was as gentle as a woman nursing a baby. He supplied their needs, but did not ask them to supply his.

lonians: **For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.** When Christ returns and assesses Paul's ministry, he will praise work that had lasting results (1 Cor. 3:10-15). If all of his converts fell away, what would it say about his ministry?

This is emotion-laden rhetoric, not a statement about the way eternal rewards are given. Paul wants to assure the Thessalonians that they are important to him. If they are skeptical that Paul is motivated by love, then Paul explains another reason: This is what the Lord wants Paul to do, and Paul wants to do it for him.

### Sending Timothy to help (3:1-5)

**So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens.** Paul's stay

in Athens is described by Luke in Acts 17—Paul went there after he was forced to leave Berea. Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea for a time, but soon rejoined Paul (Acts 17:15).

**We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith.** Timothy has already been there, so why is Paul telling them things they already know? The details remind them that their relationship with Paul has some historical depth—it is evidence that Paul cares for them and has not abandoned them.

Why was it necessary to send Timothy? **...so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.** Paul is vague on these trials—the details do not serve his purpose. Unbelievers might say that trials show that Christianity is false, but Paul reverses the idea: these trials *confirm* the message, because they were predicted. **You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know.**

So Paul tells them again: **For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.** Timothy's trip was not just to encourage them—it was also to find out if they were still faithful.

Was it really possible for Paul's efforts to have been useless? He later wrote, "You know your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:15). If he could say this to the Corinthians, despite their spiritual immaturity, it seems safe to say that efforts to serve Christ are *never* in vain, never useless. Paul is exaggerating his fears to highlight the relief he felt when he learned of the Thessalonians' faithfulness.

Since Paul sometimes exaggerates (see 1 Thess. 1:8), we have to be cautious when interpreting some of his comments. Sometimes he writes as if believers can never fall away. Here, he implies that they *can* lose their faith. His expressions of confidence encourage the readers, but his actions (sending Timothy to strengthen them) suggest that Paul knew the importance of encouragement and personal contact in



helping Christians endure trying times and overcome the temptation to give up.

### Timothy brings good news (3:6-10)

Paul completes the history by summarizing Timothy's report: **But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.** The desire for face-to-face meeting was frequently included in Greek letters of friendship. By putting this in the letter, Paul encourages the Thessalonians to continue what they are doing.

He reminds them that he endures persecution, too, and that their faithfulness has helped him: **Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.** He adds, with some exaggeration, **For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.** Good news like that really lifted our spirits, we might say. It makes our work feel worthwhile again.

Paul thanks God for their continuing faithfulness: **How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?**

Paul has finished recounting his history with the readers, but the relationship is not finished. It continues by means of this letter, but Paul also hopes that it continues with personal contact.

### Paul's prayer (3:10-13)

Just as Paul turned his joy toward God in thanks, he also turns his hopes for the future toward God in prayer: **Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.**

What was lacking in their faith? Perhaps Paul means that he wants to tell them more about the *content* of their

faith—faith in the sense of “the Christian faith.” Judging by this letter, they lack very little; Paul does not criticize what they are doing.

He prays that he will be able to visit them: **Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.**

And he prays for their spiritual growth: **May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 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.**

Does “blameless” mean that Paul expects them to be morally perfect by the time Christ returns? Paul's prayer here means about the same thing as “I hope that you achieve everything that God wants you to achieve.” It is a sentiment, not a prophecy, and not a formula for salvation.

First Thessalonians is a letter of encouragement, not a letter of doctrinal instruction, and we should not try to squeeze doctrine out of passages in which Paul is not trying to explain a doctrine. Some parts of the Bible are doctrinal, but other parts are more like a story, and some are motivational. God inspired every type, and we need to receive it the way it is, not try to force it into something else.

Paul will have more to say about love, blameless conduct, and the coming of Christ in the next chapter. ☪

#### Taking it personally

- Is my hope and joy for the future centered on other people? (2:19)
- Have I ever felt that my work in the church was useless? (3:5)
- When have I felt “really alive”? (3:8)
- Who can supply what is lacking in my faith? (3:10)

## The Greeks Had a Word for It

### “Περιχώρησις”

Actually, they didn't have a word for it, so they had to make one up. It was in the 7th century, and John of Damascus wanted a word to describe relationships within the Trinity: the Father in the Son and Spirit, the Son in the Father and Spirit, and the Spirit in the Father and Son.

So John used the word *perichōrēsis*, which comes from the Greek word *peri*, meaning “around,” and *chōreō*, meaning to “contain,” “hold,” or “make space.” The idea seems to be that the members of the Trinity contain each other, or penetrate or permeate each other.

Interestingly, a similar Greek word, *choreuō*, means “to dance,” and some people have therefore thought that *perichōrēsis* means literally “to dance around.” It doesn't. The connection is more of a

pun, not a literal definition. However, although the real meaning is mutual indwelling, not dancing, Christian writer Paul Fiddes points out, “The play on words does illustrate well the dynamic sense of *perichōrēsis*...” (*Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* [Westminster John Knox, 2001], 72; see also the *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1928, pages 242-254).

It is into this dynamic, loving Trinitarian life of the Father, the Son and the Spirit that the Father's beloved Son Jesus has brought all humanity. As one of us, and as our perfect representative, Jesus presents us to the Father fully redeemed and reconciled in his perfect humanity on our behalf. In Jesus, we dwell with him and the Father and the Spirit in *perichōrēsis*, mutual indwelling—God in us and we in God. ☪