

1 Thessalonians 1:3

PREFACE

One cannot read, or especially teach, Paul's letters for long without discovering his verbosity and longwindedness. It is all good stuff, but he can begin a sentence in verse 5 that may not end until verse 14. [In the NASB the sentence begins in v2 and ends in v5, while other translations break it up at different places. *Young's Literal Translation* does not begin a new sentence until Chapter Two!]] This makes it difficult to break down his text into bite-sized chunks. So it is not uncommon to begin a study in the middle of one of his sentences—as we will this morning.

v3

Verse 3 is where the apostle expands on what he said in v2, where he expresses his thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonians. Let's include it as we read the passage.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3.

In v2 he says that they are "always...making mention" of the Thessalonians in their prayers—that is, speaking to God on their behalf. Here he says something similar—but different—that they are "constantly bearing in mind" these three qualities. The interpretation/application of this phrase is dependent on how one translates the verse—and commentators are not of one mind.

One camp is reflected in the NIV and ESV; here is the ESV:

remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is, similar to what he said in v2 about making mention of them in their prayers, this interpretation makes "before our God and Father" an adverbial modifier, associating it with "remembering"—a perfectly logical expansion of v2, describing in greater detail the persistent content of their prayers on behalf of the Thessalonians.

The other camp follows the word order of the original Greek, leaving the phrase at the *end* of the verse, which is reflected in the KJVs and the NASB; here is the NASB:

constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father,

The first interpretation has the apostle and his men recollecting *to the Father* the church's qualities, whereas the second interpretation has them pointing out to the church that these qualities are being performed *in the sight of the Father*. Both certainly *can* be true, but what is the apostle saying? There is a legitimate argument to be made for the first interpretation, but I am inclined to side with the majority—and the original word order in the Greek, as seen in the KJVs and the NASB.

So Paul is saying that in addition to giving thanks to God for the Thessalonians, he and his fellows are "constantly bearing in mind" these laudable qualities.

constantly bearing in mind^{nasb}, remembering without ceasing^{kjvs} = *adialeiptōs* (ad-ee-al-ipe'-toce) *mnēmoneuō* (mny-mon-yoo'-o) = without omission recollecting or rehearsing.

And, of course, there is acceptable hyperbole here: just as when any of us tell someone, "I'm always thinking of you," it does not mean that twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week our mind is preoccupied with thoughts of them. It means that when their thoughts move to the churches they have planted, they never forget (omit) the Thessalonians.

In v3 Paul speaks of three qualities of the church that he never forgets:

1. Their **work of faith**
2. Their **labor of love**
3. Their **steadfastness** (enduring constancy) of **hope**

All three qualities speak of determined action springing from, motivated by the three graces that come to every believer in Christ. The direction is from the latter to the former:

faith *produces* work
love *produces* labor
hope *produces* steadfastness

The NIV, by inserting words that are not in the Greek text, expresses the idea:

We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

your work of faith

Faith (*pistis*)

work = *ergou* = from a primary (but obsolete) ergo (to work); toil (as an effort or occupation); by implication an act :- deed, doing, labour, work; **specifically the work performed.**

We cannot ignore the circular aspect of the relationship between these graces and their results. That is, from a human perspective it is difficult to nail down a starting point. Jesus spoke of this when He was asked by some of the Jews hearing His teaching, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" (John 6:28) They were coming at Him from a typical Jewish perspective: *just tell us what we must do to please God.* In His answer Jesus contradicted their supposition.

Read John 6:28-29.

What is the beginning point of work that pleases God? Faith in Christ. The writer to the Hebrews wrote that, "without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." (Hebrews 11:6) But from where does faith come?

Read Ephesians 2:8-9.

A. Skevington Wood: Faith is not a quality, a virtue, or a faculty. It is not something man can produce. It is simply a trustful response that is itself evoked by the Holy Spirit.

Barclay adds, "The whole process comes from nothing that we have done or could do." So whether we speak of faith, or the work that emerges from it, it is all of grace—it is all of God.

So the work the Thessalonians were doing—we will learn the specifics of their work as we proceed through the letter—was not *saving* work (as the Jews had hoped for), nor were they *proving* their devotion by working, but it was all just the "natural" outflow of their relationship with God in Christ.

labor of love

"Work" in "work of faith" is amplified in "labor of love."

labor = *kopou* = from <G2875> (kopto); **a cut**, i.e. (by analogy) **toil (as reducing the strength)**, literal or figurative; by implication **pains** :- labour, + trouble, **weariness**.

This is work with "extraordinary effort expended." But this labor was expended not in digging ditches, but, oddly enough, in love. And it follows that extraordinary effort would be expended in extraordinary love—*agape* love, the highest form of love. We often think of this as *sacrificial* love—not because the Greek defines it so, but because in the NT *agape* love, like faith and grace and wisdom, is the form of love God has for man—expressed especially in Christ Jesus. And if it is expressed horizontally in the body of Christ, its source is not earthly, but heavenly, produced by the work of God's Spirit in man.

Read Romans 5:5.

Robert L. Thomas: This is no mere emotional response prompted by the desirability of, or affinity for, the person loved, though feeling certainly is not absent from it. It is ultimately traceable to the *will* of the one who loves. He *determines* to love and does so no matter what the condition of the one loved. Such is God's love for man and so must the Christian's love for others be if "labor" for their good is to result. (italics added)

steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ

Woven throughout both words translated "steadfastness" and "hope" is an attitude of joy. And this is perhaps one of the more obvious lines of demarcation between the regenerate and unregenerate; those *not* in Christ, those not indwelt by the Holy Spirit, cannot understand this at all—which is why Paul specifies that their hope is grounded "in our Lord Jesus Christ," for it could be found nowhere else.

steadfastness^{nasb,esv}, **patience**^{kjvs}, **endurance**^{niv} = *hypomone* = from <G5278> (hupomeno); **cheerful (or hopeful) endurance, constancy** :- enduring, patience, patient continuance (waiting).

hope = *elpis* = from a primary elpo (**to anticipate, usually with pleasure**); expectation (abstract or concrete) or **confidence** :- faith, hope.

Interestingly, we arrive at Christ Jesus from both directions in this phrase:

- we have this hope only because of Christ: His sacrificial work on our behalf, and His indwelling Spirit;
- at the same time, however, Christ is the *object* of this hope—He is the one we hope for.

in the presence of our God and Father

I earlier mentioned the two interpretations for this phrase—

- using it to indicate the direction and earnestness of Paul's prayers, as in the NIV and ESV, or
- using it to point out to the Thessalonians that these qualities of theirs are being performed *in the sight of the Father*, as in the KJVs and the NASB.

As I said, I lean toward the latter interpretation. But now we have another decision to make: if that is indeed what he is saying, to what, precisely, does Paul refer? There are two possibilities.

One would be to place this, as a number of commentators do, at Christ's return, when the church is *literally* in His presence. Paul refers to this a little later in this letter.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20.

There it is explicit; in v3 it is ambiguous—certainly possible, but, at best, implied.

Other interpreters keep this in the here and now—a position I favor, if for no other reason that it reinforces the centrality of God in our lives. We daily conduct our faith-work, our love-labor, and our hope-enabled endurance because we are always in the presence of a merciful yet holy heavenly Father.

Matthew Henry: The great motive to sincerity is the apprehension of God's eye as always upon us; and it is a sign of sincerity when in all we do we endeavour to approve ourselves to God, and that is right which is so in the sight of God. Then is the work of faith, or labour of love, or patience of hope, sincere, when it is done under the eye of God.

The apostle Paul commends the Thessalonians for this, expressing thanksgiving to God for their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Which, then, leaves us with the obvious, and perhaps uncomfortable question:

Could your pastor or spiritual mentor give thanksgiving to God for your "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope"?