

*1 Thessalonians 3:11-13***PREFACE**

To rightly appreciate verses 11-13 of 1 Thessalonians 3, we need to understand the flow of Paul's thoughts in this passage of his letter. Let's begin by considering the passage, from v6, in big chunks.

Verse 6 ("But now...") is the turning point in the chapter; before that Paul has been expressing his worry over the spiritual health of the Thessalonians. In v6 he receives the good news from Timothy, and in v8 he places the exclamation point on his relief with, "Now we really live!"

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were so filled with joy, and praise to God, that you felt you would burst, and you had this overwhelming urge that you needed to *do* something with all this joy. Well, that's where Paul finds himself in v9; he is so bubbling over with joy because of the news Timothy has brought, that he wonders out loud what he can do with it.

For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account,

In v10 he concludes that he can *pray*—pray for the opportunity to return to them, and reinforce what had already been accomplished.

Then after answering his own question in v10, he proceeds to close out this passage in his letter with the words of his actual prayer.

vv9-10

In our last session I promised a deeper examination of vv9-10, and here it is. The NASB, KJVs and ESV treat vv9-10 as one sentence—one question. But I was intrigued by the NIV, which stops the question at v9, then seems to answer the question with v10.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10 (in NIV!)

Now, I am not in the habit of blindly accepting the interpretation of the NIV when it is an outlier. But this seemed to make sense to me. Listen to how *The Message* paraphrases this passage:

What would be an adequate thanksgiving to offer God for all the joy we experience before him because of you? We do what we can, praying away, night and day, asking for the bonus of seeing your faces again and doing what we can to help when your faith falters.

Lange Commentary

I recently began using as one of my references the old and well-respected commentary on the Bible by Dr. John P. Lange. He was born in 1802, and this work, in German, was begun in 1857, with a subsequent edition in English. This massive commentary has (in my experience, at least) a fairly unique organization: Each passage is addressed from three perspectives, or with three treatments:

- Exegetical and Critical [\[most daunting to the layman\]](#)
- Doctrinal and Ethical [\[more familiar commentary treatment\]](#)
- Homiletical and Practical [\[application, quotes from other scholars\]](#)

Why am I telling you all this? There's a reason. In Lange's examination of vv9-10 of our passage in the first, exegetical section, he points out that "Luther and Von Gerlach take v10 as the answer to v9 : What thanks? in that we pray." Regarding that, he concludes, "A fair sense, but too artificial," then proceeds to give the grammatical reason for interpreting the Greek as does the KJV and (in our time) the NASB, NKJV and ESV. That is, the two verses comprise one long question.

But then I was amused by what he writes about v10 in the next, Doctrinal and Ethical, section.

What we could not allow grammatically, that the prayer is the answer to the question, "What thanks can we render?" is yet perfectly true in reality. Prayer is the chief part of thanksgiving (Heidelberg Catechism), according to the riches, that is, of God's goodness, which we honor by receiving out of its fulness grace for grace. Supplication is thus thanksgiving, and leads to thankfulness for what has been already received, as on the other hand thanksgiving is supplication for the continuance of the blessing, and impels to further and unceasing supplication.

So he wants it both ways! He says that according to the rules of Greek grammar, one must translate it as does the KJV—and the NASB, NKJV and ESV. But in practice, it makes perfect sense to treat v10 as the answer to the question in v9—as does the NIV. And it is my contention that the larger passage, seen as a whole, would indicate that this was Paul's train of thought in the first place.

1. A revival of his spirit because of the good news brought by Timothy (v8)
2. Wondering how to rightly express his overflowing joy and thanksgiving (v9)
3. The answer? To pray for the chance to see them again (v10)
4. Followed by the actual content of his prayer (vv11-13)

And now we are ready to look at the text of Paul's prayer—although, [One commentator] points out that this is technically not a prayer. "Recognition should be given to the fact that in actual statement these verses do not form a prayer addressed directly to God. They are rather a devout prayer-wish... the solemn tone of this fervent prayer-wish approaches the language of prayer and is virtually a prayer." (Hiebert in Guzik)

v11: PRAYER FOR REUNION

The Prayer

Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you;

Part of the good news Paul received from Timothy was that the Thessalonians were "longing to see us just as we also long to see you" (v6). Hiding beneath the translation of this verse is a demonstration of the tri-unity of the Godhead, for the verb (direct) is singular, though there are multiple subjects; he is asking it of "He who is at once God and our Father" (JFB) and "Jesus our Lord." The verb is singular, implying that the subject, the Father and Son, are but one in essential Being.

The Answer

Paul's prayer was answered during his third missionary journey, about five years after he wrote this letter.

Turn to Acts 20 and the handout map.

As Acts 20 begins we find Paul in Ephesus.

Read Acts 20:1.

In a succinct, condensed account, v2 covers his trip from Ephesus to Philippi, down through the Macedonian cities—including Thessalonica, and down to Greece. Verse 4 lists those who accompanied him—and note that they are all representatives from the cities where he had started churches. I don't find evidence that when Paul left Greece, returning to Philippi, he stopped over in Thessalonica, but my favorite reference for harmonizing the life of Paul, by Frank J. Goodwin, shows this stop on his map.

So God *did* answer Paul's desire and prayer in the affirmative—five years later.

[Back to Thessalonians.](#)

v12: PRAYER FOR THEIR MATURITY

The Prayer

and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you;

The road toward spiritual maturity does not reach its end until we pass over the threshold of heaven. No matter how “old” we are in the faith, we are to continue growing in the Lord.

Paul has already had evidence that the Thessalonians were on this road, but still he encourages them to press on. Note what he writes immediately after this prayer:

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

The “Answer”

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3.

v13: PRAYER FOR THEIR SANCTIFICATION

The Prayer **[a bit more challenging]**

so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

Six months ago, when I pitched the Thessalonian letters to Pastor Jeremy as our next class, he approved, but made the point that I needed to be prepared for some challenging passages in these two letters—especially regarding the end times. I didn't ignore this counsel, but felt confident that I had the resources to handle the study.

So, for almost sixteen sessions I've been cruising along, handling the text without any undue anguish. Then, at the bottom of page three of my notes, turning to the last verse, my confidence ground suddenly to a halt. Reading the verse several times, I had some initial questions for which I could not find the answers. But finally, the venerable Andrew Murray (1828-1917) came to my rescue, pointing me in the right direction. Murray was pastor, missionary and devotional writer, perhaps best known for his exquisite volume, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*.

The apostle's motive—behind this verse, this prayer, behind this letter, behind his being in Thessalonica in the first place—is their sanctification, their holiness before a holy God. That is the primary thrust of this verse, and it comes out of his call for them to abound in *agape* love for not just their brothers and sisters in Christ, but for all people. Here is also another brief reference to the end times (as in 2:19) before his longer discussions later in this letter and in the next.

First Problem

The first thing that sidetracked me was “at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.” Immediately the image in my head (as it may be for you) was of the triumphant Christ coming down out of the clouds, either to call the redeemed home, or coming in judgment after that. But wait a minute: it says, “**with** all His saints.” In just about every instance of this word (*hagioi*) in the NT, it refers to redeemed *humanity*—not angels. See the problem? Christ will return to *collect* redeemed humanity, they will not be accompanying Him in His descent.

Second Problem

Before we resolve this, here is the second thing that sidetracked me: when I read, “so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father” I misinterpreted it because I had missed something important in the previous two verses; note *who is doing what* in these two verses:

Now may our **God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct** our way to you; and may **the Lord cause you** to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; (emphasis added)

Because I missed that in those two verses, I missed it in the third.

so that **He may establish** your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. (emphasis added)

Do you see? In everything Paul is praying for, He knows that ultimately it is *the Lord* who will cause it to happen. So in v13 I initially thought Paul was saying that he wanted them to “increase and abound in love” for others, and this would qualify them to stand before “our God and Father” without blame in holiness—which, of course, would mean that our actions on earth make us holy before God. [Not!] But what Paul is really saying is similar to what Jude wrote in his oft-repeated, eloquent doxology.

Read Jude 1:24-25.

Our holiness is in God's hands. Through the atonement and justification of His Son, through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, through God the Father hearing and answering our prayers—through the power of the Godhead as a whole we are made holy, and righteous before the *bema* (*bay'-ma*), the judgment seat of Christ, not through our own efforts, loving or not.

And here is what Andrew Murray wrote that knocked some sense into me:

The words he speaks in regard to the holiness they might aim at and expect, because God was going to work it in them, are so grand that many Christians pass them by, as practically unintelligible: “The Lord make you to increase and abound in love, to the end He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.” That promises holiness, unblamable holiness, a heart unblamable in holiness, a heart established in all this by God Himself... The Church believes so little in the mighty power of God, and the truth of His Holy Covenant, that the grace of such heart-holiness is hardly spoken of. The verse is often quoted in connection with “the coming of our Lord Jesus with His saints”; but its real point and glory [is] that when He comes we may meet Him with hearts established unblamable in holiness by God Himself: all too little this is understood or proclaimed or expected.

Resolution

Now, back to the first problem. This is resolved by understanding that the word translated “coming” (of our Lord Jesus) can also mean “presence.”

coming = *parousia* = from the presumed participle of <G3918> (pareimi); **a being near, i.e. advent** (often, return; specially of Christ to punish Jerusalem, or finally the wicked); (by implication) physical aspect :- coming, **presence**.

This is the standard word for the return of Christ during the end times, and can, indeed, refer to His descent from the clouds—but as Robert L. Thomas points out, it can also refer to the *extended visitation*. The *parousia* of Christ can include His descent, His gathering of the elect, the return to heaven “with all His saints,” and—the real setting for this verse—the moment each of us stands before Christ and the Father for our lives to be evaluated.

What this is talking about is “the perseverance of the saints,” the perseverance of their salvation. If we are truly in Christ—if we are truly saved—then *He* will “establish our hearts without blame in holiness.” Paul’s prayer is that in that day, when he, the apostle, stands before the *bema* of Christ “with all His saints,” the Thessalonians will be there as well, standing there without blame, in the holiness that only Christ can produce in our hearts.

REUNION, FIVE YEARS LATER



Session 16

