

2 Thessalonians 3:3-5

PREFACE

I suppose it is because I am a writer, whose calling it is to choose words and string them together into a cohesive thought, that I notice how the writers of Scripture don't always string *their* words together as I would. Whenever I observe this, I naturally wonder, "Why?" And we have just such an instance before us in the transition from v2 to v3. Let's begin by reading the first paragraph of Chapter Three, and see if you notice what I did between v2 and v3.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5.

As we saw in our last session, as he begins his closing of this letter ("Finally, brethren,..."), Paul makes a request of the Thessalonians that they be in prayer for his ministry, that

- the word of the Lord would spread quickly and be honored
- they (Paul and his men) would be rescued from perverse and evil men who do not have faith. (plucked from a raging current; same word used in 1 Thessalonians 1: 10—"...Jesus, who *rescues* us from the wrath to come.")

Since Paul begins v3 with "But," we naturally expect a contrast, and the logical one—especially as he is closing his thoughts with some encouragement—would be to contrast the lack of faith in these "perverse and evil men" to the faith of the Thessalonians. We expect, *for not all have faith. But you...*

Happily, the writers of Scripture listen to the Spirit, instead of human logic. Even though he is indeed sending them encouraging words, in the next three verses Paul emphasizes not them, but the Lord. Note:

But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

Paul contrasts the lack of faith in some men not with the real, yet fragile faith in other men, but with the steadfast, unblinking faithfulness of the Lord.

v3

In a sense, Paul answers his own prayer request. Immediately after asking the Thessalonians to pray that their work would not be stopped by evil, he assures them that *they* will be protected from evil by the Lord—which means that he and his fellows will be as well. And we today are the living proof that the Lord answered that prayer; the gospel was not stopped in Macedonia, but "spread rapidly" into all the world—not just the "known" world (the Roman world), but around the entire globe. This is because

the Lord is faithful

This is the adjective form (*pistos*) of the word for faith used at the end of v2 (*pistis*).

One of the more obvious threads that emerge from a reading of the Bible—especially the OT—is the contrast between the faithfulness of man and the faithfulness of God: Man is not, but God is. Man is repeatedly *unfaithful* to God (as well as other men), while God is unerringly faithful to His character and word. Even in His righteous judgment, inflicting wrath upon man (as we saw in Chapter Two) He is faithful, for He promised that He would do precisely that. The Lord God and His Christ have always and will always be and do as they say.

and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

In His faithfulness, the Lord God will strengthen and protect us.

strengthen, establish^{kjvs, esv} = *sterizo* = from a presumed derivative of <G2476> (histemi) (like <G4731> (stereos)); **to set fast, i.e. (literal) to turn resolutely in a certain direction**, or (figurative) to confirm :- fix, (e-) stablish, stedfastly set, strengthen.

protect, guard^{nkjv, esv} = *phylaxei* = probably from <G5443> (phule) through the idea of isolation; **to watch, i.e. be on guard** (literal or figurative); **by implication to preserve**, obey, avoid :- beware, **keep** (self), observe, save. Compare <G5083> (tereo).

The probable root of this word (*phyle*) is translated tribe or clan, from which we get the idea of isolation, or kept from something or someone else, as in (originally in secular Greek) a clan bound together by common descent. (*A phylax was a guard or keeper.*) And from what does the Lord protect us?

The KJV translates this with the neuter “evil,” but most other translations favor the masculine “evil one”—i.e., Satan. And this makes sense; Paul has just finished in Chapter Two a long and detailed description of Satan’s handiwork during the Tribulation. Satan will always be found at the root of evil in this world.

Would that this verse was telling us that God would encircle us with an impenetrable wall through which evil and the evil one could not pass. How much easier our lives would be were that true. But I believe we find its true meaning here in the word “preserve”; the Lord will preserve us as we pass *through* our conflicts with the evil one.

Read Jude 24-25.

v4

In v4 Paul primes them for the final instructions of his letter. But again he places what he is about to say in the context of their mutual heavenly relationship. Forty-five times in his letters Paul uses the phrase “in the Lord,” as he does here. And that’s not just reflexive boilerplate; he doesn’t just rattle it off as mindless church talk. Paul, the Thessalonians, and all believers are *in* Christ. How we think, how we speak, how we act and behave, how we perceive the world around us are all *in the Lord*.

Paul has something important to say here, but first we should not miss how he is artfully setting them up for his final counsel—not just advice, but a “command.”

- v4: We have confidence...
[that you] will continue to do what we command.
v5: May the Lord direct [you] into...the steadfastness of Christ.
v6: Now we command you...

Artfully done.

We have confidence in the Lord concerning you,

This phrase “in the Lord” works in a number of directions. I like what Calvin says about this.

John Calvin: Mark then the limits which he prescribes both for himself and for them: for himself, not to command anything but by the Lord: for them, not to render obedience except to the Lord.

that you are doing and will continue to do what we command.

Paul is “confident”; he is in a state of trust about the Thessalonian church. But this trust is based *in the Lord*: he trusts the Lord, and he trusts that what the church is doing is in the Lord. Based on this he has confidence to issue a command under his apostolic authority.

David Guzik: God doesn’t just pour spiritual maturity and stability into us. He works it in us through our cooperation with His will.

The older I get, the more I realize that this business of being a Christian is not as isolated and sterile as some believe it to be—that certain phrases such as “in the Lord” are not just mindless boilerplate, but literally describe the ideal relationship between the individual and his Lord. Because that is precisely what it is: not just a belief system, but a *relationship*.

Another standard phrase, our “walk with the Lord,” is key. As Guzik points out, it is *through* this walk, and our submission to His will, that the Lord develops our Christian character—this is how our *progressive sanctification* comes about. And in v5, one more bit of positive reinforcement before he sternly addresses bad behavior in their ranks, Paul encourages this “walk.”

v5

Paul ends this paragraph with a prayer, and although it is a wonderful thought, it has an interesting, different wording; I don’t recall hearing it put this way anywhere else in Scripture. Nonetheless it is sound counsel.

Read v5.

Again Paul places the emphasis on the Lord—*He* is the one who will “direct your hearts.” Moses said much the same thing to Israel near the end of the Law.

Read Deuteronomy 30:5-6.

May the Lord direct your hearts...

What good counsel for us today. Our hearts turn on their own accord and are pulled by external forces in myriad ways—most of which are neither profitable or righteous. Of course the reference here is not to the physical organ, but to that part of us in which our thoughts and feelings—our affections—dwell. May we all hand over all rights and rule over our hearts to the Lord. He alone will direct our path rightly.

hearts = *kardia* = prolonged from a primary kar (Latin cor, “heart”); the heart, i.e. (figurative) **the thoughts or feelings (mind)**; also (by analogy) the middle :- (+ broken-) heart (-ed).

into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

First we should address the discrepancy between the KJV—“patient waiting for Christ”—and the rest of the translations. The Greek is slightly ambiguous, but virtually all commentators, older and new, agree that it refers not to *our* steadfastness, but the steadfastness, or patience, of Christ Jesus.

steadfastness, patience, perseverance = *hypomone* = from <G5278> (hupomeno); **cheerful (or hopeful) endurance, constancy** :- enduring, patience, patient continuance (waiting).

I can think of no better nor profound reference to this than that offered by the writer to the Hebrews.

Read Hebrews 12:1-3.

There are a number of ways this could be interpreted and applied—it makes excellent food for contemplation and meditation—but let’s close with that offered by Albert Barnes, who keeps it in the context of the overall passage and letter.

Albert Barnes: The prayer of the apostle was, that they might have the love of God in their hearts, and “the patience of Christ;” that is, the same patience which Christ evinced in his trials. They were then suffering affliction and persecution. They needed patience, that they might endure their trials in a proper manner. It was natural for the apostle to refer them to the Saviour, the great example of patience, and to pray that they might have the same which he had.

Every time I read of or think about the vacillating disobedience of Israel in the OT, so quickly and easily leaving the side of Yahweh to dally in the ways of pagan deities, I try to remind myself: Am I so different? How much better would *my* life be if I subscribed to this prayer of Paul’s, that I would repeatedly, constantly, as a matter of habit direct my heart into—not *to* (i.e., up to), but *into*—the love of God and the steadfastness—the enduring constancy of Christ.