

# Thessalonians

A Careful Study Of Thessalonians

January 09, 2022

## I. Introduction

A. **2 Thessalonians 3:1-13** . . . Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you; [2] and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith. [3] But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. [4] We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. [5] May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

## B. Pray

## II. God working in and with us; wise and appropriate praying

A. [4] We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command.

1. Vs 4 is an example of a statement in scripture that we are prone to read past because it's meaning is not clear and what it infers doesn't cause us to stop and ponder what it does mean.
  - a. Because of this, some will settle for a sense of what it means based on the context rather than pray and work at seeing if they can understand it in a more clearly-defined way.
  - b. Some will keep on reading as if the statement is unimportant.
  - c. Still others will see it through the eyes of their chosen theology, and if it fits – that will be enough to satisfy them. And if it doesn't fit, they will read on as if the statement doesn't exist.
2. Today, I want to use this verse as an example of how prayer and pondering can help you get at its meaning – and to encourage you to read your Bible with these two options in mind when you encounter a statement that you are not sure what it means. With this in mind, we will consider the two main challenges to understanding this verse.
3. The **first** challenge comes from Paul's statement that he has **confidence in the Lord** that the Thessalonian believers have been doing and will continue to do what he (*Paul*) has taught them and commanded them to do.
  - a. The phrase "**confidence in the Lord**" sounds as if Paul believes the Lord will in some way work in the Thessalonian believers so

that they will not fail to do what they have been commanded. The inference is that God will in some way cause these believers to automatically do what they ought.

- b. However, this idea of God causing Christians to do what we ought to do is not supported in the rest of scripture.
    - (1) This does not mean God is not at work in each of us to bring about His good will for us. Yet we see in God's word – from the stories and other passages – that we have a free will.
    - (2) In other words, we can choose how we will respond to God's working within us. And we do choose – either to submit and do as God wills, or ignore and go our own way.
    - (3) One of the scriptures that deals with God's working and our freedom is **Philippians 2:12-13**, "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out (*make the right choices, do the right things*) your salvation with fear and trembling; [13] for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."
  - c. Therefore, though the wording in **2 Thessalonians 3:4** seems to imply God will cause us to automatically do what we ought, it is our task to see if what it seems to say is what it actually says.
    - (1) And one of the first ways we do this is to see if what it seems to say fits into the immediate context, as well as other parts of the word of God that address this issue.
    - (2) If it doesn't, then we need to pray for wisdom, trust the Holy Spirit to lead us, and take a closer look (*ponder*) to see if we can understand it as it was intended to be understood.
  - d. In this case, the context of the entire chapter leads us to conclude it means what it seems to mean with the exception of the automatic part.
    - (1) In other words, Paul is confident God's work in them has resulted in them cooperating with God in such a way that they are doing and will continue doing what they were taught and commanded to do.
    - (2) And you will see how the context show us this as we look at the second challenge.
4. The **second** significant challenge to understanding **vs 4** comes from the inference that Paul is speaking to everyone in the church.

- a. In other words, the wording makes it seem that Paul is confident every one of the Thessalonian believers are doing and will continue doing what they have been commanded to do.
    - b. However, we realize this isn't true when we get to **vs 11**, where Paul says, "For we hear that some (*implying more than one*) among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies." Obviously, not everyone was doing what they were taught and commanded to do.
  5. So how do we make sense of this seeming contradiction? If we look closer at the fuller context in which **vs 4** appears, we discover that Paul is addressing two groups within the church. One group he is talking to and the other he is talking about. Let me explain.
    - a. A careful reading of the entire chapter reveals that in most cases Paul uses the word "**you**" or the word "**brethren**," when speaking to those who are making an honest effort to live according to what they were taught and commanded.
    - b. However, when Paul uses the words "**brother**," "**some among you**," "**such persons**," "**their**," "**that person**," "**him**," and "**he**," he is most often speaking about those who are not living according to what they were taught and commanded to do.
    - c. Paul's choice of words makes it clear that he is **talking to** the sincere Christians and **talking about** the wayward ones.
    - d. When looked at from the perspective that Paul is **talking to** the sincere Christians and **talking about** the wayward ones, it becomes clear why Paul trusts the Lord to work in and with the sincere believers because they can be counted on to cooperate with God and do what they have been commanded to do.
  6. To recap **vs 4**, Paul is speaking to the sincere believers because they have shown by how they are living that they are submissive to Paul's teaching **AND** the work of the Lord in them – a divine work which enables them to live accordingly.
  7. May our lives demonstrate that we are willingly submitting to the teachings of God's word and the work of the Lord in us.
- B. As I stated at the beginning, I want to use **vs 4** to show us the value of prayer and pondering to get at the meaning of verses or sections of scripture that are not clear or seem to go against what other parts of scripture say. Therefore, at this point I want to make a few suggestions about Bible reading that might help you.

1. Make it your commitment to read single statements, verses, paragraphs, stories, or parables in light of the surrounding context, the larger context of the chapter and book, and in light of similar or modifying teachings in the rest of God's word.
2. Be careful not to force anything in God's word into your theology. Allow God's word to speak for itself even when it seems to contradict your theology. And when this happens, investigate further.
3. Make room for mystery. Accept that some questions cannot be answered this side of heaven. Knowing to live a godly life is enough.
4. Not all portions of scripture are to be taken literally. For example, parables use figurative language. Some parts of scripture use black or white statements to drive the point home, and should be understood as such.
5. Treat all scripture with respect, whether you understand it or not, for all scripture is inspired by God (**2 Timothy 3:16**).
6. Therefore, when encountering a verse like **vs 4**, ask God for insight and wisdom in understanding the verse or section of scripture, trust the Holy Spirit to lead you into the truth (**John 14:26, 16:13**), and take the time to ponder the surrounding context and similar portions in God's word.

C. Moving on to [**vs 5**] May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

1. This verse can be read as a prayer. And as in **vs 4**, this prayer is directed toward those believers who are making a sincere effort to live according to what they have been and are being taught and commanded.
2. Yet as in **vs 4**, this prayer does not do away with our free will. This is an important truth, for though this prayer is a wise, appropriate prayer, it only comes to pass in those who cooperate with God's work with them and in them.
3. For example, David prayed a similar prayer in **1 Chronicles 29:18-19**, "O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, our fathers, preserve forever this [kind of joyful giving for the building and care of your Temple] in the intentions of the heart of Your people, and **direct their heart to You**; [19] and give to my son Solomon **a perfect heart (1) to keep** Your commandments, **(2) Your testimonies and Your statutes**, and **(3) to do them all**, and **(4) to build** the temple, for which I have made provision."

- a. In spite of David's wise and appropriate prayer, we know from the OT history books that the Israelites eventually let the Temple lapse into disrepair and even desecrated it.
    - b. And though Solomon's heart was perfect in relation to building the Temple, it was not perfect in relation to keeping God's commandments, testimonies, and statutes.
    - c. The point is, this is not a one-sided, God is going to do everything prayer. Those being prayed for must cooperate with God and live according to God's commandments and will.
  - 4. For examples of the human side of this prayer, we find in the OT several examples of God's people directing their own hearts – some in the right direction and some in the wrong direction.
    - a. **2 Chronicles 19:3**, "But there is some good in you (Jehoshaphat), for you have removed the Asheroth from the land and you have set your heart to seek God."
    - b. **2 Chronicles 12:14**, "He [Rehoboam] did evil because he did not set his heart to seek the LORD."
    - c. My point is simply this. We ought to pray such wise and appropriate prayers for ourselves and those around us, while realizing that those we are praying for may or may not cooperate with what we are asking God to do.
  - 5. This is not a reason to stop praying such prayers. Instead, it is a reason to be realistic about our prayers.
    - a. We pray such prayers to God because we are convinced He is our all-knowing, all-powerful Father who is not limited in His doings by anything.
    - b. We pray for those around us because we want good for them, and we know God and submission to God is the greatest good they could ever have.
    - c. Yet we pray knowing that God will not force anyone into doing His will. He will use all His powers and wisdom to accomplish what we ask, but He does it in a way that leaves it to those He is working with and working in to decide how they will respond.
- D. In his prayer, Paul is looking for two outcomes – **(1)** that our hearts would be directed into the love of God and **(2)** that our hearts would be directed into the steadfastness of Christ.
- 1. Most likely, the words "love of God" refer to our love for God. In other words, Paul is praying that our hearts would be directed into

- a genuine and proper love for God – which would bring about the fulfillment of the first and great commandment (**Mark 12:30**).
- a. Notice, God commands us to love Him, while Paul prays that God will work with us and in us to fulfill the commandment. This is wise and appropriate praying.
  - b. The reality is, those who want to love God often find that they don't love Him as much they ought or as consistently as they ought. So what are we to do? Give up? Accept what is? Or turn to God because we are convinced He is our only hope of getting to the place where we love Him as we ought?
  - c. Therefore, if you want to love God with all your being and you realize you don't, pray. Pray that God will direct your heart in the direction of loving Him as you ought, **and** then kill off the thoughts, attitudes, words, and deeds that His work in you reveals as standing in the way of loving Him as you ought.
  - d. In the same way, if you want those around you to love God as they ought, pray, and keep on praying. Yet realize that those you are praying for must cooperate with God just as you have had to cooperate with God for your prayer to be fulfilled.
2. The words “steadfastness of Christ” refer to His resoluteness, His perseverance in doing good, His faithfulness to righteousness, and His loyalty to God in the face of rejection, trials, and tribulation.
    - a. Who of us hasn't questioned the goodness of God in the face of trying times? Who of us hasn't resorted to a selfish, ungodly solution in the face of a challenging problem or difficult person?
    - b. If this be true of us when experiencing severe pain, or living with a person who makes our life miserable, or when facing a sickness that doesn't seem to go away, how will we respond to persecution, unjust imprisonment, torture for our faith, or a horrible death?
  3. I am guessing you can see our need to pray **now**, while life is easier, for God to direct our hearts into the steadfastness of Christ.
    - a. For as Jesus said, “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous (*the result of being unfaithful*) in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much” (**Luke 16:10**).

### III. Conclusion

- A. Do you want to love God as you ought? Do you want to remain faithful to godly living and loyal to God in the face of persecution, unjust imprisonment, torture for your faith, or a horrible death?

- B. Then pray for God's help and empowerment, pray for the Lord to direct your heart into a genuine and proper love for God, and into a steadfastness of faith and godly living like that of Christ's.
- C. Finally, give your prayers the opportunity to be fulfilled in you by doing the part God gives to you to bring them to fulfillment.