

Working in the Lord's Strength

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Date: 28 April 2024

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is taken from 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, which is found on page 1192 of the Church Bibles. So 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, starting at verse 1.

Finally, brothers, pray for us that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men.

For not all have faith, but the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.

May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it. But with toil and labour, we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.

[1 : 21] It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command. If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busy bodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.

Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all. I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

This is a sign of genuineness in every letter of mine. It is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Well, good morning.

[2 : 24] Do please keep that passage open in front of you. Allow me to lead us in a prayer as we begin. To those of us, Lord, who are weary this morning, please remind us of the words that we sung together.

Turn your eyes to the heavens. Our King will return for his own. Every knee will bow. Every tongue will shout. All glory to Jesus alone. Father, many of us are weary, weary of doing good.

Please, this morning, would you lift our weary heads and sustain us with the vision of your coming return. Amen. Amen. What should we be doing as Christians?

That can be a difficult question to answer, can't it? There are many things, many, many things which seem to demand our time. But in particular, I wonder if we find it especially wearying doing work that would be considered Christian.

Many of us have discovered the wonderful reality that our children have become Bible scholars and now know the Bible far better than us. And so we don't ever need to teach them.

[3 : 33] They don't want to hear the Bible stories again. Oh, not that story again, mum. And so we might be wearied at the thought of having to wrestle them into a chair to tell them about David and Goliath one more time.

Or perhaps we're weary thinking about trying to evangelize at work. How should we even invest our time in our career? How should we invest our money?

Where should it go? What should we give it to? What should we give our spare time to? What should we give our gifts and energy to? And it can be utterly wearying. It can be wearying.

What should we do as Christians? To Thessalonians is a letter all about the times. Where are we? Who are we? What are we supposed to be doing? And the overall thrust, and there's some detail in this letter that we saw last week is particularly complicated.

But the overall thrust that we're seeing every time is one of reassurance. Reassurance. And it's the same for our chapter here this morning.

[4 : 36] The big thrust that Paul wants to leave the Thessalonians with and us is found in 3 verse 13. So if you take away anything from this morning, it is 3 verse 13. As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

Do not grow weary in doing good. Obviously, we're not quite being given the reason why. That's what we'll be spending our time in trying to work out this morning. But that is the thrust of where we're going. It is wearying being a Christian at times.

And the thrust. Do not grow weary. And the Thessalonians, they had a lot to grow weary about. Persecuted. Viciously. To the point where the Apostle Paul had been driven out by an angry, murderous mob.

And as we saw last week, lied to. Viciously. As people claiming to be Christians wrote a letter from Paul telling them that the Lord Jesus Christ had abandoned them.

What are they supposed to do when the temptation to grow weary in doing good must have been vast? What are they supposed to do other than simply survive, hold on, white knuckle it, brace?

[5 : 42] What are they supposed to be concerned with? Our first point, and we'll see both points on the handout on the back and up on the screen for us. The first point is this.

Now, now is the age of gospel advance. Now is the age of gospel advance. Two Thessalonians is a letter full of prayer.

Each chapter ends with a prayer from Paul. But now, and only now, we have the first and only command from Paul to the Thessalonians about what they should be praying.

This is the only time in the letter that Paul tells them what to pray. And we're given the content of it in verses 1 and 2. Finally, brothers, pray for us that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not all have faith.

In other words, pray that the gospel would go out. Pray that the gospel would not be hindered. In other words, engage in gospel work in your prayers. Now, it's striking, isn't it, what Paul doesn't tell them to pray for.

[6 : 56] He doesn't tell them, pray that the suffering would stop. He doesn't tell them to pray that you might just hold on just by your fingertips until the end.

No, what does he pray? He tells them to pray that the gospel would grow. But we need to remember that this is the gospel that caused Paul's suffering.

This is the gospel that caused their suffering. And yet, Paul says, pray that it goes further. Pray that it goes further.

As we said, he doesn't encourage them that their suffering would end. He doesn't pray that they would hunker in bunkers or that they would reform Thessalonian society. He prays they would work towards the spread of the gospel.

Why this focus? Well, it's important to remember that the Thessalonian church is a stunning evangelistic weapon. We mentioned, didn't we, in the first week that 1 and 2 Thessalonians are written very close together.

[7 : 58] And so often it's helpful to go back to 1 Thessalonians to understand a bit more of the context. You have a look with me at 1 Thessalonians 1, 6-10, and we'll understand why it is that the great prayer that Paul has for this church is that they engage in gospel work.

Chapter 1 of 1 Thessalonians, verse 6, beginning at verse 6. And you, Thessalonians, became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything, for they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you.

And how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Can you imagine it? So Paul, he's evangelizing a new area, he's moved over from Mesopotamia into Achaia, and he's arriving at villages with the gospel, and he's saying, have you heard about Jesus? And they're saying, yes, we have.

[9 : 12] We've heard about the Thessalonian church, how they love one another in suffering. And he moves on to the next village, have you heard about Jesus? And they say, yes, we have. We've heard about the Thessalonian church, how they preach the gospel despite persecution.

And village after village, Paul moves through to the point where Paul said in chapter 1 that we didn't have to say anything, because the gospel had sounded forth from this wonderful little church. Quite an acclaim, isn't it, for a church under persecution. The whole of Macedonia, the message has sounded forth. And so Paul is desperate that they keep going, because what would happen if they were to fall?

What would happen to his gospel message if they were to fall? We can imagine how much that would hinder it. No, now is the time for gospel advance, and Paul doesn't want them to lose sight of that fact.

It's why, I wonder if we notice this, there are so many active commands in this letter. We might have thought that the commands coming back to 2 Thessalonians would have centered on holding firm, not slipping up, not to run away, to white-knuckle it through the suffering.

[10 : 25] But chapter 1, verse 11 and 12, what's the command? To this end, we always pray for you. 2 Thessalonians 1, 11. To this end, we always pray for you that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you.

2, verse 15, as we remember from last week. 2, verse 15. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us.

And of course, our verse in chapter 3, verse 13. As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. Do we see?

This isn't a letter telling a persecuted church to just hold on. No, this is the age of gospel advance. Now is the age of gospel advance.

And Paul is desperate that they keep going, that they are a wonderful evangelistic weapon. Do not lose sight. Elizabeth Elliot, some of us will be familiar with, was a very well-known missionary.

[11 : 33] And one biographer of her described how, for those of you who aren't familiar with the story, Jim Elliot, her husband, went to a tribe in Ecuador and he was speared to death as he tried to tell them the gospel.

And Elizabeth Elliot, she returned to the Ecuadorian rainforest to live with that same tribe who had killed her husband only two years earlier. Her choice was to forgive, as the quote, as the biographer says, rather than retaliate.

And that choice sparked a change in the tribe who left behind a cycle of violence to embrace a life of love. This remarkable story rippled across the globe, inspiring millions to serve God through missions.

What had she grasped? She grasped that now is the age of gospel advance, that despite suffering, even the loss of her husband, she chose to forgive, to not weary in doing good and to share the gospel with a tribe that ultimately came to profess in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And many a missionary is in the field because of her. C.S. Lewis echoes a similar point when he says that the church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ.

[12 : 45] If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became man for no other purpose.

And now is the time of gospel advance. And of course, therefore, just to pause to think for application for a second, this is a very helpful litmus test, isn't it, for our lives.

As we think about the things that challenge us and make us weary and whether or not we should invest in that particular part of our career, whether or not we should keep plugging away with the kiddo who says that they've heard it all and seen it all and don't need to hear the Bible anymore, whether we're the only sixth former in our year who's a Christian and whether we should go to see you at that particular lunchtime or not, well, this is a wonderful litmus test, isn't it?

What age are we in? We are in the age of gospel advance. That is how we make our decisions. How do we prioritize the things in our life?

Well, what time is it? Now is the age of gospel advance. So our second point, now is the age of gospel advance, so therefore, do not grow weary in gospel work.

[14:00] So don't grow weary in gospel work. We said, didn't we, that our primary command in this passage is chapter three, verse 13. As for you brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

The passage is written to faithful brothers and sisters. Sometimes this passage is taught somewhat as a club to bash Christians over the head with for not working hard enough.

Certainly, I don't think that is our struggle. If anything, it might be perhaps that we need to be encouraged to not work so hard or put so much pressure on ourselves to work so hard in certain contexts.

But this is a tricky passage, isn't it? I wonder, as you heard Suze read it, it can feel that this has somewhat been tacked on at the end, that we've just had some amazing details about the man of lawlessness, about the work of the devil, about the restrainer, about the end of the world, and then suddenly, right at the end, Paul goes, and by the way, don't be lazy.

And we might be left thinking, where on earth has this come from? And often it is taught like that.

And that perhaps we can lose the thread thinking that how does work ethic have anything to do with Christ's return?

[15:16] But just to help us with that, there are two details that, Paul, that will be helpful for us to see, that that is exactly the relationship between work and the gospel that we need to see, that work ethic is linked to gospel work.

And the first thing to notice is that Paul himself links his hard work directly to his gospel proclamation. Paul links his hard work directly to his gospel proclamation.

Did we notice in the reading the great detail that Paul goes to in his own example of how he worked? Have a look with me from verse six, chapter three, verse six. Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us because we were not idle when we were with you. Nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it. But with toil and labor, we worked night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you.

It was not because we do not have the right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command, if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

[16:37] Why this emphasis? Why is he going into so much detail about the fact that he presented the gospel for free? That he worked hard so that he might not have to charge them?

Well, the answer comes in 1 Thessalonians again. So if we turn to 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, and we'll just look at a couple of verses. 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, verse 3.

1 Thessalonians chapter 2, verse 3. This is what Paul wants to prove. 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 3. For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive.

But just as we've been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed.

God is witness. Jumping to verse 9. For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil. We worked night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you while we proclaim to you the gospel of God.

[17:39] Do we see the logic? Paul is at such pains to prove to them that the gospel is true. To prove to them that he is not a prosperity gospel merchant.

That he is not in it for himself. That he was willing to present the gospel free of charge. Paul wants them, in other words, to understand that the gospel is authentic. And he does that by working hard so that they don't have to pay for it.

Now we're used to this if we think about prosperity gospel preachers, aren't we? Why are we skeptical of prosperity gospel preachers, those who preach that you need to give lots of money in order to have God's blessing?

Well, we're skeptical because it sounds an awful lot like a great scheme to get rich. And we're skeptical because we're not quite sure if the motive is pure. If you get rich so that we can meet God, maybe we're cynical.

But do you see how Paul is almost an anti-prosperity preacher? He makes himself poor so that you can have the gospel free of charge because he wants you to understand that this is the real gospel. [18:45] And of course, it is the pattern of Christ, isn't it? Christ gave his life for us. Paul gives his life to the people he is preaching to. And then he encourages us to give our life to others, which authenticates the gospel message.

In other words, Paul authenticated his gospel through loving work. Now he urges the Thessalonians to do the same as they have been and to distance themselves from those who are undermining the gospel by their laziness.

It's worth saying, as an aside, that this is not directed at those of us who work at home and therefore don't receive some kind of salary.

This is not directed at those who are long-term ill and would love a job but are unable to do so. We can see that, can't we, in chapter 3, verse 11. Who is this directed to? For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busy bodies.

And the word idle, it could also be translated as disorderly. In other words, it's an image of people going around basically causing, making a massive pain for the rest of the Christian family when they could be working but they would rather be busy bodies.

[20:03] So it's just worth getting that absolutely clear. But to illustrate to us, why is it that Paul links hard work with gospel proclamation? Well, I was very struck this week reading Rodney Stark's book, *The Rise of Christianity*.

And he had this to say about the work that Christians did in the early centuries when the Christian gospel was in Rome and growing significantly. Stark said this, part sociologist, part historian.

Stark set out to explain why Christianity triumphed in the Roman Empire. During just 100 years, Christianity jumped from less than 8% of the Roman Empire to nearly 50%. Why is that?

Well, there were two major plagues during this time and cities suffered especially high losses. The second plague raged and as it did so, about 5,000 people died each day.

That's 35,000 a week just in Rome, whose population never exceeded a million. And to put that into context, that's larger than the number who died in the first year of COVID in New York and in London.

[21:06] You could put it another way, up to 30% of everyone living in the entire Roman Empire died during the two plagues. No one knew how to cure the disease, whether smallpox or measles or anything else, but they could see that it spread through contact.

So anyone who could leave the city did, including the doctors. Families even left their own to die. Except for the Christians. The Christians stayed in the cities and not only did they care for their own sick, but they had dynamic nursing services.

They went out and brought in and they cared for all sorts of pagan sick. And as a result, many, many of the Christians died. So why did the Christians stay and die whilst the pagans fled to live? Pagans knew what to expect from the afterlife. Stark says it wasn't necessarily good. Christians, by contrast, believed that death would only deliver them to Jesus. And so when the Christians stayed to take care of one another, they outpaced pagans and numeric growth by three or four times.

In other words, gospel work, loving service, well, it authenticates the gospel, doesn't it? It really, really does. And if we plug into that, imagine as these Christians were going out trying to bring the sick in, that you had a subsection who were not busy at work, but busy bodies.

[22:31] It would be desperately damaging, wouldn't it? To the Christians who are seeking to serve, seeking not to be weary at doing good. So where are we?

We've seen that now is the age of gospel advance, and we've seen that Paul really wants the Thessalonian church to keep going. And he wants them ultimately to not be weary in doing good, because it is that very good which so authenticates the gospel and brings many people under the sound of the saving message of Jesus Christ crucified.

And he wants to do this in the face of the fact that many are weary, weary potentially, because those in the church family are undermining them, and they feel perhaps as though this isn't worth it. And perhaps that's you this morning. Perhaps you have a hunch that the 80-20 principle applies in Grace Church Dulwich, that 80% of the serving is done by 20% of the individuals, and you're tired of being in that 20%, wondering, why am I doing this?

Why do I keep doing this? Why prepare the Sunday school material for naughty kids who don't listen? Why try and tell the Bible story to our kids when they are bored and think they know the

Bible better than us?

[23 : 58] Why pray or invite a colleague to a one-to-one or to church when it seems like no one else does any inviting? Why go to see you at school or at the office when loads of other Christians in those contexts don't go and keep their heads down?

Well, the reason that Paul gives to strengthen our weary hearts is because now and only now is the time for gospel advance. Friends, when we stand in eternity and look around at those there who are there through our ministry, we certainly won't regret persevering now.

Charles Finney, the great revivalist and perhaps some coin him as the first ever professional evangelist, said this about evangelism. There can be no higher enjoyment found in this world than is found in pulling souls out of the fire and bringing them to Christ.

That is true, experientially true and objectively true and it is only possible now. And one day, if we know anything about the teaching of our Lord Jesus, that day will end.

One day, it won't be possible for the gospel to go out anymore. As some of us familiar with the passage of the virgins and the wedding feast, one day, the door will be closed. No more gospel preaching will be done.

[25 : 22] No more messages from pulpits. No more calls to repent. One day, the gospel age will end and Christ will return. But that is not today.

Today is the day for gospel proclamation. As we conclude, the Thessalonians were weary. Weary, it seems, of persecution from outside and from lazy, energy-sapping church members on the inside. Yet Paul wants to reassure them that it's worth it. Now is the age of the gospel and they are a beacon of light in a dark, unreached place.

We saw last week that Christ will return. He will vindicate them and they can therefore go all out now for the gospel in full assurance that they can't lose.

So for us, we've come to the end of two Thessalonians, this whistle-stop tour. What have we seen? Well, we've said, haven't we, that this is a book ultimately concerned with the times.

[26 : 30] Where are we? Who are we? What will happen? And two Thessalonians is ultimately a book of reassurance, a book here to tell us that we are radically secure.

Christ is coming, our Savior and Redeemer, He that we saw ends history with a breath. He is coming. And so what are we to do in the meantime? Well, the answer, friends, for us is to not grow weary, do not grow weary in doing gospel work.

Charles Spurgeon, the great evangelist and pastor of the Met Tab, said this, O my brothers and sisters in Christ, if sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies.

And if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay, and not madly to destroy themselves. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for.

This is a letter of deep reassurance to the Christian. It is a letter of deep warning to those who don't have their faith in Christ.

[27 : 46] One day he will return, and he will judge the world by the measuring stick of his gospel. But Christians, we know why we're here, and we know where we are going.

And so, friends, do not grow weary in doing good. You are almost home. Why don't I close us in a final prayer. Father, we thank you for this letter of two Thessalonians.

We thank you for the rallying call for the gospel to go out. Please, Father, in the certain assurance that we have in Christ's return, would we live for that final day and sustain our weak knees and our weary hearts that we might not tire in doing gospel good.

Amen.