

## Bangalore Conference, 1 Thess Exposition

### Study 3 – 1 Thess 2:17-3:13

#### Introduction

Paul's pastoral heart and his huge love and concern for these young Christians comes out throughout this short letter, but is especially clear in the passage we look at now. I wrestled long and hard with this passage to try and understand the application of this to us. It is quite clear WHAT Paul is saying. Let me paraphrase quickly – he explains that although they had left quickly and hadn't returned to Thess, they had very much wanted to. They wanted to get some news from them so much that they sent Timothy to find out. When Timothy returned, they were so glad because he told them good news. So Paul could thank God for them and continued to pray for them.

But what does all that mean for us? I think the key to this is just one word – fellowship. Paul's relationship with these Christians is full of challenge and teaching about true Christian fellowship and how that looks and how it works out in our lives. You may have read Tolkein's classic "Lord of the Rings". I haven't but I have seen the films. First is called "The fellowship of the Ring" and charts the progress of a group of characters of different kinds (a dwarf, an elf, a hobbit, and two men) all who form a pact together to take the one ring to be destroyed. Their fellowship is tested and tried but they travel and fight together for the one goal.

That's quite a good picture of real, sincere, Christian fellowship. It is a sharing together, but not just casual or trivial. It is sharing in something of eternal value, something of the highest worth and glory. And so today I want to show you Paul's fellowship with these Thessalonian Christians and they with him and for us to see in them a model for ourselves. If this applies to Paul and his friends from whom he is separated by time and space, how much more does it apply to those with whom we have easy and frequent contact? So here is a model for your fellowship together as God's people in your churches but not them only. You are in fellowship with every Christian brother or sister. I want to share with you 6 points about this fellowship:

#### Heartfelt fellowship

Remember the background to this letter and our reading between the lines? Attempts have been made by Paul's enemies to discredit him. First his character and then his behaviour was questioned. One of the points of attack may have been that he breezed in and then left quickly and hasn't been heard of since. "He is a fly-by-night" they may have said. "If he cared so much for you, why hasn't he been back?" they might have asked. So Paul is keen to assure this church that it wasn't for lack of desire that he hadn't returned. He uses graphic language here. "Torn away" is the language of a parent having their children taken away by some tragedy or of a child being orphaned from parents. "Intense longing" is a word for any strong passion or a desire that controls.

It should have been obvious from the way it happened that Paul had not wanted to leave so soon, but even though apart, Paul and co had a great desire to be back with them. This is the nature of **heartfelt fellowship**. It doesn't want to be alone, but to be with brothers and sisters in Christ. V19 is an extraordinary thing to say. What is hope, joy, crown in which we will glory? Might expect to answer "Christ" or "God", but surprisingly it is YOU, says Paul. You are glory and joy.

Part of our joy when Christ returns and we join him forever will be the presence of those that God has joined us in fellowship with now, those that he has used us to reach with the gospel. Remember that parable that Jesus told about the shrewd servant (Luke 16) who knew he was in debt and so reduced the debt of all his masters debtors so they would be kind to him? The point? Jesus says we should use our worldly resources to gain friends so that you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. In other words, use resources here to win people for God so that you will see them again in heaven.

As we will read on, it is obvious that Paul's fellowship and desire for these fellow Christians was heartfelt. He longed to hear how they were getting on, he worried over them, he rejoiced over them.

APP: Illust – when I was growing up, one of my Sunday School teachers was also a teacher in a school. She often complained about her job and didn't seem to even like children at all. I am sure she was a good teacher, but it was just a job to her.

It is possible in any job, whatever it is, to do it because you must or because you ought to. You can become a professional without your heart being engaged. It wasn't like that for Paul and it shouldn't be like that for you. Is the progress of your people your "glory and joy"? Fellowship means to have a share in something.

Heartfelt means sincere, genuine, concerned, passionate, real. If your fellowship together is not like that, then you need to repent and put it right. It doesn't happen automatically and without action on your part. But it is an outworking of that fruit of the Spirit in the lives of his people, that overflowing love that God has spread abroad in our hearts.

#### Sacrificial fellowship

The sincerity of the fellowship can be seen in how much it costs. Paul modelled **sacrificial fellowship** with his friends in Thess. Paul tells them that he had been kept from returning and he attributes that blockage ultimately to Satan. There are two extremes among Christians with regard to Satan or the devil. One is to completely ignore him as if he was not real and not to take seriously what the bible tells us of him. The other is to be so preoccupied with him and fascinated with him that we give him too much credit and end up afraid. Paul doesn't elaborate here, but he knows it is Satan's work to accuse Christians and to

put obstacles in their way. The word used here (stopped or hindered) is a military word for a trench or ditch that would be dug to block the army's way. Don't know what it was, but whatever it was, it meant that Paul couldn't return.

But he didn't leave it there. At great cost to himself, he sent Tim to encourage them and to bring back report. You can see that it was costly by the way he describes Tim. He is brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel. Paul could have presumably just sent a letter, or maybe someone to pass on a letter and bring back a factual report of how the church was going. But true Christian fellowship is not only heartfelt but also sacrificial, it costs something. Athens wasn't an easy place to be on your own as a Christian worker. You can read about it in Acts 17. Paul confesses that it was a distressing place to be because of its idolatry. It was a hard place to preach, full of clever people. There was a great deal of sneering at Paul's preaching there. But Paul's concern for his fellow Christians caused him to sacrifice his own comfort at having Tim's help, in order that this little church might be strengthened and encouraged.

Illust – Anything that is worth something, usually costs. Might not be money, in fact it often isn't money. My older daughter likes to make cards. She could go to the shop and buy a birthday card for a few pence. But when she makes a card, I know it has taken her time and effort. It costs her to do it and it is worth more because of that.

APP: Christian fellowship is sacrificial, in other words, it causes Christians to gladly make sacrifices for the good of others. In what he did, Paul here is only following his own command to others:

Php 2:3-4 *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."*

Where is the imperative for this? Why should we do this when it will cost us? Because this is what Jesus did for us. Paul said to the elders of Ephesus as he left them on that beach, speaking about how he had worked to supply his own needs and not be a burden:

Ac 20:35 *"In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"*

When did your fellowship with other Christians last cost you anything? Have you put yourself out for the good of others? Have you given of yourself so that others might benefit? Turn your eyes back to the cross whenever you feel the cost is too great. Remember that the Lord Jesus became poor so that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor 8:9)

## Fellowship in trials

Thirdly, Paul's fellowship was a **fellowship in trials**. Paul was especially concerned to send Tim to them because they were going through the mill so to speak. Trials CAN be unsettling, they can knock you about, they can test your faith and trust. Paul's fellowship with them in their trials is not only to be with them in thought and prayer, but also to remind them that these are expected ("destined for them"). Forewarned is forearmed as they say and Paul and co had made no secret about the fact that those who turn to Christ and follow him, make themselves enemies of the world.

2 Ti 3:12-13 *"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived."*

Paul didn't invent this idea, but it was merely the working out of what Jesus said to his disciples in John 15:18ff. There is a deep problem in the heart of every person because of the sin that we inherit. We are naturally in rebellion against God. That rebellion shows itself in countless ways every day, but one of those ways is to oppose and attack those who resemble God, those who are godly, those who live differently, those whose heart is no longer centred on self but on Christ.

Illust – have you ever seen film of an invading army, marching into a city? What is the first thing they do? They find some image of the present ruler, maybe a statue or a poster. And then they pull it down, they spoil it and ruin it. That is what sinful man does to the image of God. Rebellion against God often shows itself in rebellion and hatred against his people, those who bear his likeness.

It is a blessing to be free from the painful trial of persecution in our land at this time, but it may also be an indictment of how conforming and compromising our lives have become that we are NOT a reproach to the ungodly world around us.

APP: Fellowship in trials. What does this mean? It means that sincere fellowship is concerned for others in their trials. So concerned that it doesn't just stop at mere feeling. In Paul's case, it caused him to act, to write, to pray. Not only that but this goes both ways. V7 tells us that the progress the Thess Christians were making, their faithful stand even in trials was a blessing and encouragement to Paul and co facing their own trials.

If we have fellowship with fellow Christians, then we have an obligation to them when they are struggling and contending for the faith. I think the focus here is on persecution because of their faith, but I don't think we need limit this to only those cases. Every battle and struggle and trial is ultimately one of faith for the Christian and Paul's example is of concern that acts! If you know of a brother or sister in Christ who is going through trials, maybe you can go to them to be that direct encouragement. But if you can't go (as Paul couldn't) maybe you can send another (like Tim). Maybe you can write to them. You can certainly pray for them. True fellowship is fellowship in trials.

## Mutual fellowship

I can remember in some of our preaching classes at college, being told that preaching must not just be statements that are true, and illustrations that are vivid and memorable, but **application** that is pointed. In other words, you must tell people WHAT they

are to do as a result of God's word, HOW they are to do it and WHY they should. We are trying to model that approach with you here this week (not sure how well!).

Talked about Paul's relationship with Thess Christians. It was heartfelt fellowship, sacrificial fellowship and it was a sharing with them even in their persecutions and trials. I think the WHAT is becoming clear – that we are to exercise and express such fellowship with fellow Christians, local and remote. We have touched on the how – to be heartfelt, to be giving and sacrificial (and there is a bit more to come on this). But I want to ask **WHY** should you do this? Can I give you just two reasons under this next point. True fellowship is **mutual fellowship**. In other words, this is not a one way street. It is not that it's all "give" but rather that this fellowship is shared. Here are the two reasons from what Paul writes here.

**Because they need it** – Paul was worried about this church, that somehow they might have been tempted away from the truth of the gospel by outward pressure. He was pleased to learn that they hadn't, but he also recognised that they still might be unsettled and that there were still issues in the church that required more teaching and growth (v10, some highlighted later in letter). Your brothers and sisters in Christ need the fellowship you give to them.

**Because you will be blessed** – v7. After hearing good news of Thess, Paul could say that it was such a comfort and encouragement to hear of their progress. V8 is strong language "we really live". They had been holding their breath to find out news, but now they could breathe again.

APP: Can you see that modelling, imitating this kind of fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ is not only right, not only biblical, not only a help to others, but will also be a blessing to YOU! Why would you NOT want to work at this? You have so much to gain, and will be poorer for the lack of it. All that we have said of our own attitude and behaviour goes the other way round too. It is mutual fellowship for mutual benefit and blessing. As we encourage and strengthen others, we too are blessed and helped ourselves.

### Fellowship that brings rejoicing

That brings us nicely onto my next point (just two more brief points!). True fellowship is one that **brings rejoicing**. Paul feared that all their work in Thess had been in vain and that it might have been overturned by the enemies of the gospel there. He was concerned for his friends, desperate to hear some news, forcibly separated from them. But when news came, it made him glad, it made him praise God and rejoice. The news was that this really was mutual fellowship (v6). This church was standing firm and so is a cause of great thanksgiving to God. Paul speaks about them as his glory and joy.

APP: If your fellowship with others is minimal, you miss out on the blessing God has for you. Sure, it is often painful to share with others like this (it certainly was for Paul), sure it is costly, but how God blesses his sharing, fellowshiping people!

### Fellowship in prayer

Last point could do with sermon all to itself probably but we are going to close with this. V11-13 is a kind of prayer or a wish for Paul's friends in Thess. It is almost like a pronounced blessing or benediction on them. Last point – **fellowship in prayer**. This is part of the HOW application. How do you express this fellowship with others? At least in prayer. Three parts to this prayer. First that God would enable them to meet again. Second that God would increase their love. Third that he would strengthen and make them blameless at Christ's return.

There was a desire to be together, to meet up. If you don't want to be in the same room as other Christian brothers and sisters, the desire for fellowship must be questioned. Paul prayed for this. There was a desire for overflowing, far-reaching love to increase. Not just love for nearest and dearest, but love for each other "and for everyone else." That is a love like God's.

Mt 5:43-45 " *You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*"

There was a desire for that bright hope to be present, the hope of Christ's return, and for this hope to strengthen them. How do you bear with present trials? Only by keeping bright that hope that Christ is alpha and omega, that he is saviour and Lord, that he is appointed judge, that he will return to bring all to account. Paul wrote these words to another struggling church:

2 Co 4:16-18 " *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*"

We fix our eyes on Jesus Christ. We look forward to his return because he has prepared us for that day. No longer a day of dread fear. He has made us ready, he has made us holy.

Christian brothers, you are part of the same family. Whatever your differences before, if you are in Christ, you have been joined to every other believer. They are now part of your family. You know how family can be a great blessing but also hard work. Just so with the people of God. As a minister, a pastor, you have a special role in that family and it is to model fellowship, to encourage fellowship, to be blessed by the fellowship of God's people.

What kind of fellowship? Heartfelt, emotional, concerned fellowship. Sacrificial, costly fellowship. Fellowship in trials and difficulties (not superficial), mutual fellowship. This fellowship brings rejoicing and blessing to us all and is covered in prayer.

Close with Paul's prayer for his friends and make it ours today (3:12-13).