

XV. Stand Firm

May 4/5, 2011 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

Aim: To stand firm in the gospel of Jesus Christ which leads to good works, knowing that we have been loved, chosen, called, saved, and sanctified, and will be glorified forever with Christ, all through the sovereignty of God.

A. Paul Gives Thanks (2 Th. 2:13-17)

Paul's description of the man of lawlessness and his awesome powers has been solemn to the point of being frightening. Though intended to comfort his friends in Thessalonica, it could not help but stir up their apprehensions as well. Would they be able to withstand the satanic workings of this deceiver? Would they end up being hardened with a spirit of delusion and finally condemned? To counter such fears, the apostle ends this section on an assuring note. Aware that multitudes will fall prey to the wiles of the man of lawlessness and suffer doom, he is confident that this will not be the fate of his readers. God's grace to the Thessalonian Christians means that they will not be condemned, but saved in the day of wrath (1 Th. 1:10).

This thanksgiving section is the second one in 2 Thessalonians, with the first one being 1:3ff. This pattern of two thanksgivings in one letter matches that of 1 Thessalonians (1 Th. 1:2-10; 2:13-16), but is not found in any of the other Pauline letters. Another similarity between the two Thessalonian letters is that they both contain a similar benediction in the middle of the letter (1 Th. 3:11-13; 2 Th. 2:16-17). This section of encouragement is contrasted with the previous one dealing with the condemnation of the wicked (2:11-12).

1. Doctrine (2:13-14)

In these two verses, the apostle provides us with an overview of the process of salvation which stretches from eternity in the past and reaches towards eternity in the future. With just a few words, the apostle sweeps the reader across the vastness of God's redemptive plan to affirm the believer's security in that plan. Salvation began with God's loving choice in eternity past and will continue until glorification in the future (Rom. 8:29-30). These two verses are a system of theology in miniature. The apostle's thanksgiving covers the whole work of creation from the eternal choice of God to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus in the world to come.

a) Thanksgiving (2:13a)

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you...

Paul begins his declaration of thanksgiving with the word 'but' (*ἡμεῖς, ἔμεῖς*). He had just concluded a description of those who would not receive the love of the truth and who were on their way to hell because of it. What a relief to focus instead upon his brothers and sisters! In contrast to the unredeemed, who refuse to love and obey the truth, are those who willingly do both; in contrast to those whom God judges are those He redeems; in contrast to those who believe Satan's lies are those who believe God's truth; in contrast to those who follow Antichrist are those who follow Christ.

Paul had earlier felt it only proper to thank God on account of the progress the church had made in its spiritual life (1:3). By repeating the same phrase here, the apostle says they feel that same inner compulsion as they reflect on God's grace in securing their salvation.

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b) Salvation (2:13b-14)

...brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

They know their friends will not be condemned because they are loved and chosen by God to be saved. God's work of salvation began with His sovereign, uninfluenced, undeserved love. That love was the basis for His election of believers (Eph. 1:4-5). God's electing love is not conditioned on any merit in the recipients (Dt. 7:7).

Flowing out of God's predetermined love is His sovereign choice of believers. God's choice dates 'from the beginning' (*ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, ap archēs*) namely the beginning of all things (cp. 2 Tim. 1:9). Paul tells us elsewhere that 'before the foundation of the world' (Eph. 1:4), God determined whom He would save. The Almighty chose these people in order that He might save them.

Ultimately their security rests not on anything they have done, but upon what God has done for them. Paul speaks here of his friends as those chosen to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. God saves His chosen people through a process of making them holy believers! Note that all three persons of the Trinity are mentioned in this verse.

Having established that God chooses people in order that they might be saved, Paul went on to draw the attention of his friends in Thessalonica to two aspects of this 'salvation' (*σωτηριον, sōtērion*). In the first place, he reminded them that God the Holy Spirit initiates it all. He sanctifies those who believe. This means that He makes them holy. The word 'sanctification' (*ἀγιασμό, hagiasmō*) usually has two meanings in Scripture. The more common of the two is narrower in scope. It refers to the way that those who are already believers are helped to grow in grace. At this point, Paul uses the word in a wider, more general sense. The idea behind it is that a person is set apart for the service of God. In that sense, the whole process of salvation is involved.

Sanctification is the work of the 'Spirit' (*πνεύματος, pneumatos*) that sets believers apart from sin to righteousness. This miracle starts at salvation and includes a total transformation. Those set apart from sin to God will lead lives of progressive sanctification, of increasing holiness toward Christlikeness. The Spirit regenerates those who hear and believe the truth by granting them repentance and the gift of faith.

There is more to salvation, however, than the activity of the Holy Spirit. If a person is to be saved, he or she must have 'belief in the truth' (*πιστει ἀληθείας, pistei alētheias*) about the gospel. While the latter cannot take place without the former, we must not allow the conviction that faith is God's gift to His chosen (Eph. 2:8) to obscure the fact that it is also an activity of the renewed nature. It is we who must believe. The Almighty does not believe for us or through us, but grants us by His Spirit the ability to do something that was formerly beyond our power. There is a deliberate contrast here between the followers of Antichrist and those who serve the true Christ. On the one hand, there are those who embrace lies and falsehood (2:11), while on the other, there are those who believe the truth.

The apostle probably still has in mind the character of those deluded by the man of lawlessness. Their lives are marked by rejection of the truth on the one hand, and by love of wickedness on

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the other (v. 12). God's plan for His people entails a total reversal of that condition. He means them to be lovers of the truth and rejecters of wickedness.

Even though God determined to set His love upon His chosen people before the universe itself came into being, they remain true to their nature and are 'children of wrath' like everybody else (Eph. 2:3) until they hear the summons that bids them take up the cross and follow Jesus. God's gracious effectual call of believers to salvation by the Holy Spirit is irresistible.

The call of God comes through the presentation of the gospel. The Lord has not only decided upon the identity of the people whom He intends to call, He has also settled the manner in which He means to do it! It is through the preaching of the gospel to every creature that the elect are 'called' (*ἐκάλεσεν, ekalesen*) home to their preordained place near the heart of God.

This great reversal had taken place in the Thessalonians as a result of the ministry of Paul, Silas, and Timothy among them. If we have heard and believed the 'gospel' (*εὐαγγελίου, euangelion*) and experienced the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, then we have good grounds to believe that we are God's elect people.

What makes this so glorious is the end that God has in view for saving His people. He does so not only that they may escape condemnation but that they might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 16). They are destined not only for deliverance but also for glorification! That firm statement of the security of salvation reveals that God loved, chose, called, and transformed believers for the purpose of eternally reflecting the glory of Christ to them and through them. Based on this sovereign scheme, there was no need for the Thessalonians to be insecure about their salvation, anxious about the Lord's return, or fearful that they were in the Day of Judgment of the ungodly.

We, like the Thessalonians, are to remember that in God's providence we have heard and responded, and continue to hear and respond to, the great 'gospel.' This encourages us in our present circumstances to know that one of the purposes of this call through the gospel is 'for obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.' 'Glory' refers here to the glory that Christians will enjoy as our final state in the new heavens and earth.

The outcome of the whole process is that those who are called in this manner 'obtain glory' (*περιποίησιν δόξης peripoiēsēsin doxēs*). They eventually come to share in the splendor that surrounds the very being of God. The glory of Christ which His people are to obtain is their sharing in His glory at the Parousia. Have you noticed that Paul sees the salvation of every Christian as a process which has its origin before the dawn of time and its conclusion in the far-distant reaches of eternity to come? By reminding his friends of the whole grand sweep of it, Paul intended them to grasp that no one is more secure than a Christian.

The salvation for which the people of God have been chosen comprises much more than their deliverance from the wrath to come. It involves, in this life, their believing acceptance of the truth of the gospel in which God's call was conveyed to them, together with the sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit within them; while in the life to come it carries the sure promise of their participation in the glory of their Lord.

2. Application (2:15)

Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.

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Having assured his readers of their destiny in the day of the Lord, the apostle exhorts them to live appropriately. Have they been chosen by God to be saved rather than condemned? Then, they must ‘stand firm’ (*στήκετε, stēkete*) and hold to the teachings they were given.

This entire section of his letter had been prompted by false reports that the day of the Lord had come (v. 2). How fitting, then, having instructed them so fully about the events that must precede the coming of the Lord and assured them of their safety in that day, that Paul should encourage them to stand firm. They had no cause at all to be so tossed about in this matter.

What he had written should also have renewed their confidence in the teachings that had originally been delivered to them. While Paul was in Thessalonica, they had received the body of apostolic teaching that formed the foundation of all the churches. This body of truth, known as the apostolic ‘tradition’ was to serve as the authoritative reference point for their life. In context, the ‘traditions’ are both the doctrines and practices ‘that you were taught’ *both* by Paul’s teaching and preaching when he previously visited Thessalonica (‘word’) and by his previous letter, 1 Thessalonians (‘epistle’).

The word ‘traditions’ (*παραδόσεις, paradoseis*) is often associated with the verbs ‘deliver’ (*παραδίδωμι, paradidōmi*) and ‘receive’ (*παραλαμβάνω, paralambanō*). The idea of delivering and receiving authoritative traditions emphasizes, firstly that Christianity has a historical starting point (the person and work of Christ), and secondly, that Christ appointed apostles to spread these authoritative traditions (cp. Gal. 1:9, 12; 2:9). For us, in God’s providence, the only infallible authoritative ‘traditions’ that God wanted us to have are recorded for us in Scripture. ‘Holding fast’ to the doctrines and practices set out in the Bible is a significant part of our ‘standing firm.’

Paul did not have in mind a body of extrabiblical tradition that is equal to God’s revelation in Scripture; in fact, the Bible condemns such human tradition (Is. 29:13; Mt. 15:3; Mark 7:8-9, 13; Col. 2:8). *Paradosis* literally means ‘things handed down’ and refers here to divine revelation (cp. 3:6; 1 Cor. 11:2). The Thessalonians were to hold fast to what God had handed down, both orally (by ‘word,’ *λόγου, logou*) and in writing (by ‘epistle,’ *ἐπιστολής, epistolēs*), through Paul and the other apostles.

The word ‘traditions’ has an important meaning. It refers to the truth that Paul had passed on because he in his turn had received it from God (cp. Gal. 1:11-12). There is a deliberate contrast here between Paul’s behavior and that of those who were troubling the Thessalonian Christians. They were circulating notions which they had cooked up for themselves; Paul had faithfully relayed a message that had its origin with God Himself. Paul was not making a plea that we cling to that which is merely old but rather that we cling to that which is authentic.

We need to exercise particular care when we refer to this matter of ‘tradition.’ When the Roman Catholic church talks about tradition, it does not mean what Paul meant. The apostle envisaged a process where the truths which God had revealed were handed on from one generation of believers to another without being altered in transmission (cp. 2 Tim. 2:2). When Roman Catholic teachers refer to tradition they mean something quite different, an accumulated body of teachings which do not occur in the Bible but which have become so widely accepted that they are recognized as having the same validity as the truths contained in Scripture. Paul’s understand was that tradition meant the faithful transmission of the teachings of Scripture, and that alone, from one generation to another.

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That same apostolic tradition had been recorded in the New Testament Scriptures and remains the standard for church and Christian life today. It contains all that we need to know about God, about salvation, about the future, and about how to live. Endless trouble always results when we, like the Thessalonians, listen to anything else that claims to be God's message to us.

3. Benediction (2:16-17)

Fittingly, Paul closes this section of his letter with a prayer or benediction. This benediction in the middle of 2 Thessalonians is similar to the one in the middle of 1 Thessalonians (1 Th. 3:11-13). Essentially it is a prayer for inner strength. In this benediction, Paul prays that God would comfort and strengthen the church. Paul understood that they could not obey his exhortation in their own strength but needed instead to depend on God's power.

a) *What God Has Done (2:16)*

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace...

His previous discussion centered on God's love in choosing and calling and glorifying them. Out of His grace He has also given them 'eternal encouragement' (*παράκλησιν αἰώνιαν, paraklēsin aiōnian*) that extends beyond time, as well as 'good hope' (*ἐλπίδα ἀγαθήν, elpida agathēn*) of glorious things to come by His 'grace' (*χάριτι, chariti*).

b) *What God Is Doing (2:17)*

...comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work.

Paul asks that God would 'encourage' or 'comfort' (*παρακαλέσαι, parakalesai*) and 'strengthen' or 'establish' (*στηριζαί, stērixai*) them. He knows that their greatest need is for inner stability, for unwavering faith and constant hope and love, as they wait for the coming of the Lord.

But inward resilience is not all he asks for. As well as steadfast, he wants the Christians in Thessalonica to be productive as they wait for the Lord. He wants them to know God's power to perform those deeds and speak those words that belong to the Christian's life of loving service and gospel witness.

B. Paul Asks for Prayer (2 Th. 3:1-5)

1. Request (3:1-2)

a) *Request for Prayer (3:1a)*

Finally, brethren, pray for us...

The expression 'Finally, brothers (*ἀδελφοί, adelphoi*),' usually signals the beginning of a new section in Paul's letters. It does not necessarily mean that the apostle has come to the last thing he wants to say, but it commonly indicates that he has either finished, or is about to finish, dealing with the most important issues that prompted him to write. 'Finally' (*λοιπόν, loipon*) can have the sense of finality, but it literally means 'for the rest,' or 'besides that' (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:16). Paul used the same term in Philippians 3:1 and 1 Thessalonians 4:1, and in neither instance was he ready to conclude his epistle; he was simply making a transition.

In this letter so far, Paul has addressed two major concerns troubling the Thessalonian Christians. He has assured them that God has not forgotten them in their sufferings (1:3-12), and he has

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calmed their fears regarding the coming of the day of the Lord (2:1-17). One matter remains for him to write about: the problem of persistent refusal by some members of the church to work as they wait for the Lord to come. But before taking up this issue, Paul makes a request of his fellow believers – to pray for him and his colleagues.

‘Pray’ is in the present tense (*προσευχεσθε, proseuchesthe*), meaning that he asked the Thessalonians to ‘continually pray’ or ‘make prayer a constant pattern’ in their lives. Even with his influence, success, respect, and fame, this request demonstrated Paul’s meekness and humility. The man who was inarguably the strongest of spiritual leaders requested prayer from new believers. It also showed his confidence in the inherent power of prayer.

So often when we seek the prayers of others, our chief concern is that they might plead with God to bless us by granting us good health or by easing our material circumstances. Paul’s approach was different. Note that he urged his friends to pray for two things concerning his ministry.

b) Success of the Gospel (3:1b)

...that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you...

Paul does not ask his readers to pray for his safety or for sufficient funds to support the mission in Corinth. He wants them to pray for the advance of the Lord’s message. His concern is not so much for the well-being of its messengers, but for the success of the gospel. What happens to him personally does not really matter to the apostle (cp. Acts 20:24). He lived for the advance of the Lord’s message. This single, self-denying passion lay behind his tireless work and colossal achievements.

The apostle urged his friends to pray so that the message of salvation might have ‘free course.’ This means he longed to see it make rapid progress. ‘Spread rapidly’ (*τρέχει, trechē*) literally means ‘to speed on’ or ‘to make progress.’ By using the word ‘race ahead,’ he is alluding to both Psalm 147:15 and to a race of athletes. In effect, the gospel is being compared to an athlete who has no obstacles in his path and is therefore able to run without being hindered. In the same way as an athlete ‘races ahead’ with speed and is unhindered, so Paul requests that the ‘word’ should quickly spread to many cities. By implication, he is not simply referring to this own preaching, but is concerned that gospel preaching in general should spread.

Paul speaks almost as though the gospel had a life of its own. He wants it to run like a swift athlete through the world and be received as a victorious hero wherever it goes. That apparently had happened in Thessalonica (cp. Acts 17:4; 1 Th. 1:4-5).

The second part of his request, that the gospel should ‘be glorified’ (*δοξάζηται, doxazētai*), meaning to be praised, honored, and exalted, refers to his longing that it might meet with an enthusiastic reception, that when people heard it they would honor it by responding positively to its demands. Continuing the athlete metaphor, when the runner wins, he is ‘glorified,’ or honored. Hence, as the ‘word’ wins over the hearts of the elect (2:13), it is to be honored. Paul wanted the Thessalonians to pray that just as the word was received in Thessalonica, that the same kind of thing would happen again (‘just as it is with you’). In sum, Paul requests that gospel preaching should spread and be powerful.

Paul’s words suggest that his experience in Corinth, the scene of his present missionary work, was frustrating, which was in marked contrast to the way things had been when he first brought the message of the cross to Thessalonica. The word of the Lord was not spreading as swiftly there as it had farther north in Macedonia. Luke, in his account of the mission in Corinth (Acts

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18:5-17), tells of the strong opposition Paul encountered in that city from unbelieving Jews. They made his task very difficult and discouraging, a fact probably reflected in this plea to the Thessalonians for continuing prayer. Facing an uphill task in his efforts to make the truth known in Corinth, the apostle clearly longed for a measure of the impetus that he had experienced in Thessalonica.

c) Defeat of Evil (3:2)

...and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith.

Closely connected with this first request is a second for deliverance from wicked and evil men. Paul wanted his friends to pray that he and his missionary colleagues would be kept safe from malicious characters who tried to prevent the spread of the gospel by rendering the evangelists ineffective. Perhaps this has particular reference to the situation in Corinth, where Paul was the intended victim of a plot to incriminate him with the local authorities (Acts 18:12-17). If so, it would seem that the prayers of his friends were answered for the case was heard by a man named Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, who dismissed it as a frivolous waste of the court's time.

'Perverse' (*ἀτόπων ατορῶν*) literally means 'out of place,' and denotes what is unbecoming or inappropriate. Paul further describes them with the adjective 'evil' (*πονηρῶν, ponērōn*), meaning 'malignant' or 'aggressively wicked.' In the Greek text, there is a definite article ('the') before 'perverse and evil men.' Paul may be referring to a definite group of men whom he and the Thessalonians know. Usually, if this option is chosen, the group is thought to be composed of non-Christian Jews in Corinth (where Paul is writing from). Alternately, Paul could be referring to a definite class – that is, the class of 'perverse and evil men' as a whole. Virtually all English translations take this option, as they do not insert the word 'the.' This option usually results in the evil men being understood as anyone who actively opposes the gospel, whether false believers within the church, non-Christian Jews, or pagans.

When making this request, Paul is probably not thinking of wicked men in general, but of those who specifically reject and oppose the gospel. His preaching typically had a twofold effect upon people (cp. 2 Cor. 2:16). Some responded with joyful acceptance and became imitators of his way of life. Others rejected what he had to say and became his implacable enemies and opponents of the gospel. It is almost certainly this latter group that he refers to here, for their behavior is related to the fact that not everyone has faith. They are described as 'wicked and evil men' on account of the viciousness of their actions. Their thoughts and passions are corrupt and their dealings with other people destructive.

'For not all have faith (*πίστις, pistis*)' gives the reason that some men oppose the gospel. Here Paul is admitting the problems caused by those who do not have 'faith' in the gospel, but at the same time he is requesting prayer that they gospel may go to those who do not have 'faith.'

Once more, his concern was not primarily for his own safety but for the advance of the gospel. The people in view – in this case probably unbelieving Jews – were ready to do anything to rid the city of the pestilent message of the cross. Only as the missionaries were delivered from them was there any hope of the word of the Lord continuing to spread in Corinth and beyond.

It is important that we do not miss Paul's motive for asking his friends to pray that he and his fellow evangelists be kept out of trouble. No doubt the obvious consideration that it is never pleasant to be on the receiving end of physical violence or devious trickery was part of it all, but

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the success of the gospel was his overriding objective. If his message was to have ‘free course,’ the evangelists would need to be able to get their message across unhindered.

2. Confidence (3:3-4)

Paul abruptly switches from concerns about himself (3:1-2) to directly encourage the Thessalonians’ spiritual growth (3:3-5).

a) *The Faithfulness of God (3:3)*

But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one.

Real as the threat posed by unbelievers might be, it does not dominate the apostle in a way that makes him cower and lose confidence. On the contrary, he knows that the Lord is faithful (cp. Ps. 9:10). Probably, he is referring to the ‘Lord’ (κύριος, *kyrios*) being ‘faithful’ (πιστός, *pistos*) to His choosing and calling of the Thessalonians.

Paul went on to speak of his confidence in God. He did so in two ways. First of all, there is a deliberate pun where he contrasted the faithlessness of his persecutors with the faithfulness of the Lord (cp. v. 2). You never really know where you are with the opponents of the gospel. They are fickle and unreliable. You cannot be certain of their reactions. The Lord, however, is dependable and can be relied upon to place His people on a firm footing and to protect them, not only from the malice of their human enemies, but also from the schemes of the devil who is at work behind the scenes.

While seeking their help for his own special needs as a preacher of the gospel, he does not forget their struggles. He knows that they too, face the hostility of men and women who do not have faith, and that they need to share in the comfort that comes from knowing the Lord’s faithfulness. In that regard, he assures them that the Lord Jesus will strengthen and protect them from the evil one. God will firmly ‘establish’ (στηριζει, *stērixēi*) believers on the inside and ‘guard’ (φυλάξει, *phulaxēi*) them on the outside from the evil one. For those who are truly chosen, Paul reminds us in this encouraging statement that the Lord’s faithfulness ensures their perseverance.

Most modern translations and virtually all modern commentators prefer ‘evil one’ to ‘evil.’ Grammatically, the Greek adjective *ponēros* (in the genitive form of *ponērou*, *πονηρού*) could be either masculine (‘evil one’ – that is, Satan) or neuter (‘evil’—that is, generic evil). In context, ‘evil one’ is preferred because of 2:9 and the personal contrast between ‘the Lord’ and Satan. The activity of Satan against the interests of preachers and their converts has been referred to in 1 Th. 2:18; 3:5.

b) *The Faithfulness of the Thessalonians (3:4)*

And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, both that you do and will do the things we command you.

Secondly, Paul observed that his ‘confidence’ (πεποιθαμεν, *pepoithamen*) in God was such that he felt able to require certain things of them without any fear that his commands would be met by refusal. This was his way of preparing his readers for what was to follow, a passage where we see him in a very stern and unyielding frame of mind. In fact, in the next section, Paul will use the word ‘command’ three more times (3:6, 10, 12).

Aware as he is that there are some who are defying his instructions (see vv. 6ff.), the apostle is nevertheless confident that the church as a whole is doing what he has commanded. The

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problem he must address involves recalcitrant individuals, not the whole congregation, and he wants to assure the faithful of his confidence in them. He had abundant evidence that the Lord Jesus was powerfully at work in them, and that through His grace they were not only presently obeying his commands but would continue to do so.

3. Benediction (3:5)

Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ.

This reliance upon the Lord prompts another fervent prayer wish or benediction from the apostle with the intent to continue encouraging the Thessalonians. Their continued obedience depends upon the state of their hearts, the inner source of life that controls words and actions. He wants their hearts to be filled with God's own love and Christ's perseverance and prays that the Lord would remove any obstacles to that being the case.

'Direct' or 'make straight' is the same word (*κατερθύναι, kateuthunai*) used in 1 Thessalonians 3:11 to indicate the removing of all obstacles and hindrances as someone opened a pathway or road. The Thessalonians are to be drawn closer to, and to appreciate, God's love and Christ's perseverance, and then, by implication, are to imitate God the Father and Christ. Strengthened with that love and perseverance they will be able to do all that is required of them. Ultimately, our ability to do the Lord's will does not depend on our own resources.

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to increasingly understand how patient Christ was with their own sins, problems, and struggles and to understand better His own endurance in trials, so that they would have greater spiritual endurance. He desired that they learn from their Savior's example and move forward in love and patience under persecution.

For next time: Read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18.