

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Christian Friendship – 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

We are familiar with different types of letters. Tax letters, solicitor's letters, love letters, 'dear John' letters, letters from the bank, letters providing quotations for a new bathroom, letters to Santa. Each letter has its own special purpose and uses its own type of language to communicate that purpose.

So also was it in the time of Paul – different letters for different purposes. 1 Thessalonians is sometimes classified as a *friendship letter*, and that's especially the case because of the language that's used in the passage before us here, which is the type of language that was used in letters written between friends expressing their feelings for each other and their commitment to each other.

We sometimes imagine Paul to be a brain on legs – logical and cerebral, a *thinking* machine rather than a *feeling* person. But this whole section is marked by deep emotions on Paul's part, an expression of feelings for his friends that is almost embarrassingly intense. So, we will consider this section under the heading of 'Christian friendship', and plot something of what Christian friendship looks like as Paul describes his own relationship to the Thessalonians.

1. Concern: attempting to visit them (2:17-20)

We find, first of all, that friendship is marked by *concern*. We can feel the concern in 2:17-20. The phrase Paul uses when he speaks about being torn away from the Thessalonians (2:17) has the sense of making someone an orphan. And that fits what Paul has said earlier in the chapter, in verses 7 and 11, where he describes himself as a *mother* and a *father* to the Thessalonians. He didn't want to be separated from them and it caused him the type of emotional distress a parent feels when they're separated from their children.

Parents feel this if it happens to them when they're out with their children in a public

place, like a shopping centre or a park or a beach. One moment your child is there, the next moment not there! And your heart leaps with anxiety, or you have an immediate sick feeling deep in your stomach: where is he? where's she gone?

Paul had bonded with them, like a *mother* nursing her baby, like a *father* with all the excited, nervous, proud-but-scared-witless energy a father can feel with a newborn child – and yet they have been orphaned. So, it certainly wasn't a case of 'out of sight out of mind'. Paul says they were separated 'in person, not in thought', literally – 'in face, not in heart'.

And as Paul was forced to move from Thessalonica to Berea and then to Athens and then to Corinth, he was all the time trying to work out how he could get back to them (2:17b-18). Paul does not say how Satan blocked their way, so it presumably wasn't important to know. But we know from elsewhere in Paul's letters that this fits with what we know of Satan who sets himself against God and against God's people.

Paul explains why he wanted to see them in 2:19-20. He wanted to see them because they were the fruit of his ministry. He is looking forward to the day when Jesus comes again. He's already spoken about that a few times in the letter, and will have a lot more to say about it later on. And when Jesus returns, Paul's hope, his joy, his *crown* – his symbol of victory – will be his friends, the Thessalonians. He will not boast about himself, or glory in himself; his joy and glory will come from when his children will be shown to have persevered to the end. And just as parents take great delight in the accomplishments of their children, not because it makes *them* look great but because they're concerned above all for their children's welfare, so Paul does with the church at Thessalonica. It's a friendship that exercises concern.

2. Cost: sending Timothy to them (3:1-5)

Concern is one thing, action is something entirely different. Paul followed through on his concern. This is not just friendship *defined*, this is friendship *demonstrated*. It would appear from this section that there is an appropriate anxiety we can feel about people in desperate situations. And that's particularly the case in friendship, where we are made vulnerable by virtue of the friendship. We recognise in friendship, where our life gets bound up with the life of another, that there could be, *and probably will be*, cost involved – sorrow, hurt, pain.

Here is the cost of his friendship with the Thessalonians. Not just the cost of the concern itself, but the cost of doing something about his concern rather than merely wiping his hands of it, or trying to pretend it doesn't exist. Paul sends Timothy. We're probably meant to understand that Paul sent Timothy at personal cost – not financial cost, necessarily, although that would be a factor, but because then Paul would be without Timothy. Twice in this section (in verse 1 and in verse 5), Paul says, 'when we could stand it no longer'. In sending Timothy to them, Paul has also put *himself* out for them. Paul was prepared to make this sacrifice. It made him lonely and vulnerable; but their well-being was what really mattered.

Timothy was to strengthen them and encourage them – especially as Paul was afraid they might have been led astray on the wrong path, blown off course. So, it should come as no surprise if we need that too. It's part of what Christian friendship is all about – which acknowledges the reality of weakness, the possibility of failure, the likelihood of disappointment, and so draws alongside each other to strengthen and encourage. We're not called to be lone rangers or tough action heroes, with no need for supporting relationships. We're called not to serve our own needs, but the needs of others – even though it costs – to strengthen and encourage others.

Timothy was also to make sure they weren't unsettled by their suffering, to remind them that it wasn't bad karma that horrible things

were happening. In fact, they were destined for this type of suffering; it was a mark they were on the right track. The fact that they are suffering doesn't mean God is not reliable, or can't be trusted. It's what followers of Jesus should expect. Suffering for the gospel seems to be built into the gospel itself.

But that doesn't stop Paul, who has invested himself into them, fretting for them, feeling the cost of friendship and doing something about it.

3. Consolation: receiving good news from them (3:6-8)

We are so used to the speed of communication these days, with e-mail and text messaging and news reports as it happens, that we can barely imagine how Paul felt as he waited at least several weeks for Timothy to return. But we can sense the sense of sheer relief and delight with the good news.

What happens, of course, is that Timothy returns from the Thessalonians with good news. If concern and cost are factors in Christian friendship, so too – thankfully – is consolation. And this section reminds us in striking and beautiful language about the strength and refreshment that good friendship brings, the consolation and comfort that come when friendship works well.

It's good news that Timothy brings – about their faith and love, that they also have positive memories of Paul, which means that in the middle of his own distress he was encouraged, and has himself, in turn, been strengthened, given new life.

4. Commitment: praying for them (3:9-13)

Here is a fourth factor of friendship – commitment. It's a commitment that's expressed in this passage in prayer.

Paul prays for the Thessalonians, but he begins with *thanksgiving* (3:9). That's significant. Is our Christian friendship marked by thankfulness? In fact, ever since the start of the letter Paul has been expressing thanks for the Thessalonians. He gives thanks for them in 1:2; then he gives thanks for them in 2:13; and

he gives thanks for them again in 3:9! In fact, in a sense, all the way through, from 1:2 onwards, has been one long section of thankfulness – thanking God for them and praying to God for them.

It's a model for us, to reflect on our relationship with each other in the church, to discern what God has been doing these years he has kept us together, and to thank him for each other. That's the context for the prayer which follows.

Paul prays, first, about his desire to visit them (3:11). Then he expresses his hope that their love will increase (3:12). And then he expresses his concern that they will persevere (3:13).

Of course, we do not find ourselves in exactly the same situation as Paul and the Thessalonians, but there are underlying assumptions in Paul's prayer, in his concern for the Thessalonians, which can shape our relationships with each other, and our praying for each other. What do we learn?

- We learn that prayer is grounded in God himself, the God we know through our Lord Jesus Christ – the Father and Jesus together – so that, like a compass needle that points to north, prayer takes its orientation from the character of God as his character is revealed in Jesus. If God the Father is God the Father and if Jesus is Jesus, then we pray for each other with confidence.
- We learn that prayer is rooted in thanksgiving, thanking God for each other.
- We learn that prayer brings together past, present, and future. Paul rejoices in what God has done in the *past*, prays for God to continue to work in the *present*, and prays for the present in the light of the future 'when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones'.

- And we learn that through prayer, we express our concern for others, and what is best for others, for things like overflowing love, and strengthened hearts, and holy lives. When did we last pray things like that for our Christian friends?

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It's a passionate and powerful passage; it's both a comfort and a challenge.

It's a *challenge* to make time to care for each other – not just to be civil with one another, but truly to connect to each other, to be *people-oriented* rather than *task-oriented*, to give ourselves time to listen properly, to care properly. Also – and this is tricky for some of us – to allow ourselves to need others, to remind ourselves that sometimes we need to be on the receiving end of someone else's care of us.

It's a *comfort* because of the way it speaks about the sense of solidarity between Christian believers, Paul's concern for the Thessalonians and their concern for him, his wanting to encourage them and his being encouraged *by* them, his sacrifices for them, his thanks for them, his prayer for them – all grounded in what God has done for us, is doing in us, and looking forward to what will be when the friendship we have know will be swallowed up in a still higher relationship with God and with each other, as we stand, holy and blameless, in the presence of God. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 21 October 2007