**17th November 2019**

**2 Thessalonians 3.1-18**

Today we finish our look at Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians by considering his words in chapter three. It’s a game of two halves as they say. The first section is about his request for prayer and the second part is his concern that everyone in the community of faith pulls their weight.

**In verses 1-5 Paul makes a personal request for prayer**. He asks for prayer for two things: that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured; and prayers for protection and deliverance from wicked and evil people who oppose the gospel and the spread of the Christian faith. Prayer is so vital to the church’s ministry and how intimate and precious that the apostle Paul, arguably the greatest church planter of all, was not above needing or seeking the prayers of the churches he had established, so that the gospel may spread rapidly.

I have been reading an article by **Paul Hattaway[[1]](#endnote-1)** about the revival of Christian faith in China.

The Church has grown from about 1 million believers at the advent of Communism in 1949 to around 100 million today! Numerically, at least, this is the greatest revival in Christian history. There has been a great work of the Holy Spirit, and God’s children have learned that they grow stronger when they are placed under great pressure.

Approximately 60 million of China’s Christians are members of unregistered evangelical house churches, which have increasingly been targeted in recent decades. Their refusal to register with the Communist authorities, means the house churches are technically illegal, and therefore bear the brunt of the most intense persecution.

Paul Hattaway found the most difficult part of house meetings to be the intense prayer sessions, which often continue for hours. Every believer would kneel and cry out to God from the depths of their souls. In order to fit in, he too would kneel on the cold, hard floors. I found the ground was often wet from believers’ tears as they engaged in fervent intercession.

He writes: ‘To be honest, at times I too have had tears in my eyes during those long prayer meetings, though not from compassion, but because I felt close to passing out from the pain in my knees, especially during winter-time when my lower legs went completely numb from kneeling. When participating in areas that have been touched by powerful heaven-sent revival, I sometimes found my spirit was willing, but my flesh was weak (Matthew 26:41). On occasions I think I may have caught a glimpse of what revival meetings were like in the time of Wesley, Whitefield, Finney or Roberts. In my experience, when the Holy Spirit brings true revival to a community it is exhilarating and terrifying, joyful and exhausting, all rolled into one.’

The reality is that the mighty revival in China during the last 40 years has not been the work of men and women. It has been a sovereign act of God, who has chosen to show his glory through weak vessels, “so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever” (1 Peter 4:11).

Over a number of years, I have been privileged to travel throughout China, meeting and recording the testimonies of many elderly house church leaders, who don’t want the story of what God has done in China to go to the grave with them. Among the hundreds of stirring eyewitness testimonies I’ve heard, two spring to mind that offer a unique insight into the character of God and the special touch of the Holy Spirit, which has characterized the Chinese revival.

In the 1980s, many house church leaders in one province were imprisoned and forced to render hard labour 18 hours per day, seven days a week. Totally exhausted, they struggled to survive under intense spiritual, physical and mental pressure. To make matters worse, the prison food was dire, and the men had not eaten any protein for weeks. In one cell, three pastors cried out to God and asked him for mercy. One of them prayed a simple prayer: “Lord Jesus, please send us some protein so we will have strength to endure each day.”

Moments later, a large rat that they’d heard scurrying around inside the wall appeared at the end of the cell. The rat rolled a chicken egg across the floor and left it right in front of the stunned pastors! For weeks the same thing occurred, with the rat rolling a fresh egg into the cell at the same time each day. The protein made a huge difference to the pastors, and helped them endure the relentless workload.

The second story occurred in the Wanxian area of eastern Sichuan, after a team of 16 house church evangelists from neighbouring Henan Province arrived to preach the gospel. The evangelists were shocked to discover that the people despised them and would not listen to their message. For generations, bandits from Henan had ridden horses across the mountains to Wanxian and raided local communities, carrying away their goods and their young women as wives and concubines. Centuries of bitterness had ensued, and the people of Wanxian had grown to intensely hate anyone from Henan.

Despite the negative reception, the evangelists refused to give up, even after they were brutally beaten with rocks and sticks by the locals, who tried to drive them away. The evangelists decided to stay until God told them otherwise. They targeted one particular village where the hostility was greatest, and all 16 evangelists decided to fast and pray.

As they sought God’s will, the Lord spoke individually to each team member, saying: “Wash the people’s feet.” They didn’t understand, as they thought foot-washing was only for members of the body of Christ, but they decided to obey. Finding some old discarded buckets and containers, they filled them with water, went to the village entrance and waited for the farmers to return from the fields after their long day’s work.

Months passed, and the evangelists had still not led a single person to Christ in that area. Whenever the Christians offered to wash the farmers’ feet they were mocked and rejected, and some had the buckets of water thrown over their heads. The evangelists, however, remained convinced that God had told them to wash the people’s feet, so they refused to give up.

After a while, the farmers saw it was helpful to have their dirty feet cleaned for them, but they wouldn’t let the evangelists speak to them. For almost three years the believers quietly prayed for each person as they washed their feet. Through harsh summers and bitterly cold winters they continued to sit at the village entrance and pray for the salvation of the people.

Finally, one old man couldn’t take it anymore. He asked the believers what motivated them to stay for so long and to endure such scorn. The evangelists told him that the risen Son of God had told them to wash the people’s feet, and they were determined to obey his command.

Upon hearing this, the man broke down under intense conviction and became the first Christian in that village. The floodgates opened, and salvation spread like wildfire. Within three weeks, 1,500 people had surrendered their lives to Christ. The new believers soon took the gospel to other areas, and today an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 people have accepted Christ in Wanxian.

This testimony epitomises the best of the Chinese revival. Believers have learned to trust in Christ alone, and are willing to do lowly things that make little sense to human reason, such as washing the feet of hostile villagers for almost three years before seeing a breakthrough.

Paul asks for prayer for the spread of the gospel and for perseverance and protection. We need to ask for the same too.

**In the next section, verses 6-15, we hear Paul censuring those in this community of believers who chose not to work**. It is clear from this letter that these individuals were not physically incapable of working (e.g. due to age or disability) but preferred to live off the generosity of others. And to compound matters, they used their ‘free’ time to gossip and be indolent. Paul urged them to follow his example and use their ‘hands to earn an honest crust’![[2]](#endnote-2)

This particular passage of Scripture has been open to much interpretation, and for many years it was quoted by those of a certain political persuasion to reproach the unemployed. Those without employment were denounced as ‘work-shy’ or ‘shiftless’ – people who preferred to avail themselves of state benefits rather than find a job. Using the passage in this way, they were building on an existing narrative of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving poor’ where the latter were regarded as idle people not worthy of our sympathy or financial support.

Although there is an impending General Election, it is interesting that no mainstream British political party has resorted to using this rhetoric thankfully. It can be argued that this language tends to be deployed by politicians when there is high unemployment, and rather than accept that they need to do more to help those without work, they argue that there are jobs aplenty and that the unemployed should work harder to find them!

Interestingly, although we invariably regard work as an antidote to poverty, often there is no correlation between the two. For instance, Britain is currently experiencing record levels of employment but there is still a great deal of (financial) need. The Trussell Trust, an anti-poverty charity founded on Christian principles, recently released a report that highlighted increased levels of foodbank usage and noted that many of its clients were people in work.

There were no ‘state benefits’ in Paul’s time, but we do read about the help Christians gave their brothers and sisters in need in Acts 4.24, Acts 6.1-4 and Acts 20.35. Paul’s writings offer us a challenge: should our attitude toward those ‘in need’ be guided by compassion and a genuine interest in their welfare, rather than moving quickly to criticism borne out of a desire *not* to engage with the real reasons why some people are poor?

This letter has shown us that the Thessalonian church held a strong belief in Jesus’ imminent return. However, some members appear to have become so entranced by the idea that they have ‘put their feet up’ and stopped working.

They have misunderstood the mundane practicalities of the life of faith and failed to appreciate their responsibilities within the fellowship – in fact they have become ‘busybodies’ (v.11) who have been abusing the generosity of others. Paul not only reprimands them but tells other members of the church to avoid them; he still recognizes them as believers and hopes that this drastic action will shock them into mending their ways. Elsewhere (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4) Paul shows how everyone, with their different gifts and capabilities, must make their individual contribution if a church is to be strong – there can be no room for ‘passengers’!

What can we contribute to the work of Christ’s church? For some of us our daily work is all consuming and perhaps our only contribution to the church is financial. Others may have more time and availability. Paul urges the Thessalonians to never tire of doing good (v13)

His final greetings remind us of the heart of the gospel: peace with God and the knowledge of the grace of our Lord Jesus. It trips easily off our tongues yet twenty years or so before this letter had been written nobody outside of a small town in Palestine had even heard of Jesus of Nazareth, let alone used the words lord and Christ in connection with him. Now people in northern Greece hailed him with these royal titles and looked to him to supply grace – the powerful love of the one true God, flooding and transforming their lives and their world. This same Lord Jesus, this king and Lord is ready to pour that same grace on you, our community, our world. All he requires is that you should respond to his love and faithfulness with an answering love and faithfulness of your own, and you will find like the Thessalonians the way to a life of gratitude and hope.

1. Paul Hattaway <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2019/October-2019/China-Inside-the-biggest-revival-in-history> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Reddie <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/104-november-december-2019-ca/proper-28/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)