

Clarity and Comfort

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)

Brothers, Pray For Us

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2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Thessalonians 3.

Over the course of this series, we've spent a great deal of time talking about the Thessalonians and the challenges they were facing. But in order to understand the passage in front of us this morning, we need to turn our attention to Paul and his circumstances. As it turns out, he was facing some challenges of his own.

Paul wrote this letter while he was ministering in the city of Corinth, and that was not an easy place to do ministry. In fact, it is often suggested that Paul's early days in Corinth represented the most difficult season of his ministry.

Put yourself in his shoes for a minute. He had been chased out of Thessalonica and then chased out of Berea. After a quick pitstop in Athens he began his ministry in Corinth and there he was met with even more hostility. Paul was a courageous, Spirit-filled man, but he wasn't a robot. That kind of persistent rejection and adversity takes a toll on a person.

THAT is the backstory to this passage. What we have before us this morning is a hurting pastor asking his church to lift him up in prayer.

With that in mind, look with me now to 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you,² and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith.³ But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.⁴ And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. (2 Thessalonians 3:1-5 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Keith mentioned last Sunday that one of the best ways to learn to pray is to join a prayer group and to listen to an older brother or sister as they pray. That is 100% true. Listening to the prayers of mature, faithful mothers and fathers of the faith is one of the best ways to grow in your prayer life.

Well, listen close church because our text this morning provides us with a glimpse into the prayer of an Apostle.

The Prayer of an Apostle

Look again at verses 1-2:

Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you,² and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2 ESV)

Before we dive in, let's stop and take note of one monumental lesson: The Apostle Paul NEEDED prayer!

Are you more mature than the Apostle Paul? No. No, you are not. Therefore, if HE needed to humble himself and if HE needed to reach out to his brothers and sisters for prayer then SO TOO DO YOU!

And, think about who he sent this request to; this letter is for the struggling, baby-Christian church in Thessalonica. These are brand-spanking-new believers and, to be honest, they had plenty on their plates already.

One might expect Paul to give them a pass, or to save his requests for his more spiritually mature churches. But Paul was not too proud to reach out to these new believers and to ask for their prayers. And he expected them to follow through. One commentator notes:

The apostle expects the Thessalonians not merely to utter a quick prayer for him that will make them briefly feel good about themselves before they return to the concerns that preoccupy their own lives. Instead, Paul challenges, even commands, the converts in Thessalonica to regularly and repeatedly bring the issues of his life and his ministry to the throne of God in prayer.¹

I confess, I was a bit rebuked by this. By and large we tend to expect very little from young Christians. And, because we expect little, we demand little. But that wasn't Paul's approach. No, he expected more from his young church. He knew they were inexperienced in the faith, and he knew that they had plenty of problems in their own lives, but he also knew that there would be no spiritual victory in his ministry in Corinth without prayer so he called this young church to action.

Before we even jump into our outline, I think there are two obvious implications for us here. First of all, let's be reminded this morning that there are no believers in this church who are too spiritually immature to pray. No one gets a pass. If you're a Christian, then you're called to be a prayer warrior. You graduated into that when you went through the waters of baptism. We are in a spiritual battle and we need all hands-on deck.

The second obvious implication here is that every believer in this church NEEDS prayer. Let's get practical: Did you know that last week between the congregations of CBC and RCC we only submitted TWO prayer requests? TWO! Now, that's probably indicative of a communication problem. On our end, we're going to do our best to clean this process up. Ron is going to include the prayer request link in the weekly e-blasts so that, when you register for Sunday, you can also

¹ Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 585.

click the prayer-request link to submit your requests. Or, if you'd like, you can write it out on a piece of paper and slip it into the offering box after the service.

But here's a question: Is this ONLY a communication problem? Even before Covid, I was always surprised by how few requests came in each week. If we believe that we need prayer, then we need to start asking for it. Do you want God to transform the heart of your neighbour, or your son, or your co-worker? Let us join you in prayer for that.

If Paul needed prayer support, then so too do we. And as we pray, let's prioritize the kinds of things that Paul prioritized. The first thing we find in this prayer before us is:

1. A plea for gospel power

He writes in verse 1:

Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you (2 Thessalonians 3:1 ESV)

You could also phrase that request another way. You could pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
¹⁰Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:9b-10 ESV)

That's what Paul's asking for, isn't it? Let your kingdom come as your message spreads rapidly! Let your name be hallowed as your gospel is honoured! Jesus taught us to pray this way. This is the kind of prayer that God delights to answer.

And we learn from Paul's future letters that God DID answer this prayer in a powerful way! In spite of fierce opposition and hard hearts, God established a thriving church in the city of Corinth! It was a miracle! It was an answer to prayer! In fact, it was an answer to THIS prayer.

If I were preaching through Paul's letters to the Corinthians, I would probably introduce that series by telling you about how Paul was relentless in his missionary journeys. And he WAS! You can read all about that in Acts 17. Nobody could keep Paul down. He was a man on fire. Yes!

But I am almost certain that, had I preached that series before studying this book, I would have missed THIS detail. Behind the miraculous growth of the Corinthian church – behind the man on fire – was a fledgling group of new believers in Thessalonica pleading for the rapid spread of the gospel in the city of Corinth.

Behind this incredible move of the Spirit was a team of baby believers living in a hostile city, huddled together in a prayer group lifting up the requests of their beloved Pastor Paul.

Isn't that beautiful?

That's how our God works!

Behind every powerful preacher there are pockets of prayer warriors. They often don't see the victory. In fact, after most prayer nights, there's really no indication that the prayers have done anything at all. And yet, those prayers are moving heavenly armies! Those prayers are toppling spiritual strongholds! Those prayers are setting captives free!

Do you believe that? The Apostle Paul did.

If anyone had reason to trust in his own abilities, it was Paul. He was always the smartest person in the room – scratch that – he was always the smartest person in the CITY! But Paul knew that intellectual prowess was powerless to change a human heart. Paul knew that, were he to see any spiritual growth as a result of his ministry, it would only come from the Lord. In fact, when he looked back at the “success” of his ministry, he could say:

I planted, Apollos watered, but **God gave the growth.** (1 Corinthians 3:6 ESV)

So, let's apply what we're learning here: We need you to pray that the preaching of the gospel would spread rapidly in the city of Orillia. I want to request in particular that you pray for the

preaching of the Word that goes forth from this place. I am standing here looking out at a room full of people. Undoubtedly, there are some stone hearts in this room. And church, I have worked hard on this sermon and I promise to always work hard on my sermons, but I can tell you right now that I will NEVER be able to work hard enough on a sermon to transform a heart of stone! Never! The ONLY way that a dead, unbelieving, unregenerated heart is going to be transformed into a living, faith-filled, Christ-exalting heart is if God does a MIRACLE!

So, have you asked Him for that this week? Have you lifted up our Sunday service and asked God to do a miracle in our midst? God's Word tells us that sometimes we have not because we ask not.

A long time ago I adopted a habit that I learned from Charles Spurgeon. Every time he walked up to his pulpit, he prayed to himself: "I believe in the Holy Ghost." That's my prayer each Sunday. If you know me at all, you know that I do not walk up here believing in myself. I certainly don't believe in my ability to persuade. But I DO believe that the Spirit of God can transform even the hardest heart and that He can do it in an instant! And there isn't a week that goes by when I don't ask Him to do that. Would you join me in praying that prayer each week?

I'm reminded this morning of our partner Paul who is ministering the gospel in Southeast Asia. Today, he is going to stand up and preach the gospel in a city that is hostile to the gospel – a city that is immersed in generations of idolatry. How many of us have prayed for him this week?

Listen: Behind every powerful preacher there are pockets of prayer warriors. Paul knew that. So he called on this church to plead for gospel power. Let's be a people who pray those kinds of prayers.

That was his first request, and his second was like it. Look again at verse 2. Paul asked the church to pray:

that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. (2 Thessalonians 3:2a ESV)

Here, we find:

2. A prayer for spiritual protection

Again, you might rephrase this request and pray:

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:13 ESV)

I'm drawing these parallels because I want you to recognize that Paul is not "reinventing the wheel" here. He's taking the prayer that Jesus taught us and he's applying it to his present circumstances. If you want to make sure that you're praying for the kinds of things that you ought to be praying for, that right there is a strategy that will not let you down.

Paul was facing opposition in Corinth. We learn about that struggle in Acts 18:

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. ⁶ **And when they opposed and reviled him**, he shook out his garments (Acts 18:5-6a ESV)

Paul had been preaching in the synagogue, but he was once again thrown out by the Jewish leaders. So, Paul shook out his garments and began ministering the gospel in people's houses.

They continued to resist and oppose him, to the extent that it was looking like Paul would be chased out of town once again. So he wrote to his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica. He asked them to pray:

that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. (2 Thessalonians 3:2 ESV)

Not all have faith.

Evangelism is hard, isn't it? Jesus told us to generously scatter the seed of the gospel out into the world, but he also told us that many of those seeds would never take root. Jesus taught us elsewhere that sometimes, when we're scattering the seed of the gospel, we might actually find some ROCKS flying back at our heads! He said:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, **they will also persecute you.** (John 15:18-20a ESV)

Not all have faith. And that’s hard. It’s hard to be bold with the gospel when your family counters with insults. It’s hard to be bold in your workplace when one of your co-workers is constantly antagonizing you.

Paul was facing that in Corinth. His opposition wanted more than anything to shut him down. He was beleaguered. He was exhausted. But, rather than crawling into a corner with his tail between his legs, Paul pulled out his parchment and wrote out a prayer request.

And, we learn in the book of Acts that God answered this request! In verses 9-11 we read:

And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent,¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.”¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. (Acts 18:9-11 ESV)

Paul was ready to throw in the towel and instead he was blessed with a year-and-a-half of fruitful ministry! God knows what we need, and He knows how to protect us.

Church, it is likely going to get harder in this city before it gets better. It’s going to get harder in your home – harder on your street – harder in our culture – but DO NOT BE SILENT! I hope and pray and BELIEVE that there are many in this city who are His people. They just don’t know it yet. So, let’s find them! They might even be in this room with us today.

Are you feeling spiritual opposition? That’s not unusual. You’re in a spiritual battle! It would be weird if you DIDN’T feel some spiritual push back! Boldness in the face of opposition is not natural. If the Apostle Paul needed prayer support, then so do you. Let’s go to battle for one another in this place.

The next thing we find in the Apostle’s prayer is:

3. A promise of provision

Look with me at verses 3-4:

But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. ⁴ And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. (2 Thessalonians 3:3-4 ESV)

Something interesting happens here. In the first two verses, Paul was expressing HIS needs and HIS requests to the Thessalonians in order that they might pray for him, but in verse three he turns his attention away from his own needs and starts to point the Thessalonians to the Lord.

He's asking them to pray, but he's also TEACHING them how to pray. It's as if he's saying: "Pray for me, and don't forget that the Lord WILL answer these requests because the Lord is FAITHFUL! He is faithful to meet my needs and He is faithful to meet your needs too."

I would suggest that this little interaction is an example of why it is so invaluable to pray with other believers. Our faith often overflows when we pray. If you are struggling in your prayer life, spend some time praying with others, and let the overflow of their faith fill your tank. Confidence in the Lord is contagious.

Let me give you a practical example. When I pray with Emma Morrison, I often have this experience. I'll ask her how I can be praying for her, and she'll briefly explain some of her needs. But then, after voicing her needs – much in the same way that Paul does in today's text – she will move into her confidence. She'll say something like, "Pray that the Lord will give me energy. But, oh, the Lord is so good to me! And He never leaves me! He is a wonderful Savior and I know that He will provide." It's almost as if she can't voice her needs without voicing her confidence.

I think that's exactly what's happening here. Paul has some requests, but he doesn't want these young believers to think for a second that he is doubting God's provision.

God has got this! The Lord is faithful.

And if the Lord is faithful, and if I am doing the Lord's work, and if I am praying the prayers that the Lord has taught me to pray, then what have I to fear? He will surely do it!

Last month, our kids memorized Psalm 27:1. It says:

The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1 ESV)

Do we believe that? Paul did! Next time you're feeling discouraged – next time you're questioning whether or not God will pull through – I have a recording of little Dante Allen belting out this verse like it's a battle cry and it will fill you with more courage than you'll know what to do with!

We're teaching these truths to our children, let's make sure that we're learning them ourselves.

And finally, we see here:

4. A pastor's heart for his people

Look with me at verse 5:

May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. (2 Thessalonians 3:5 ESV)

What a beautiful, pastoral prayer that is.

Both Paul and the Thessalonians were in some tumultuous water. Corinth was a MESS. Thessalonica was a MESS. Humanly speaking, there was every reason for discouragement and despair.

So, Paul asks the Lord for one last thing: He asks for a redirection of the heart.

In seasons of exhaustion and fear, it is important – no – it is ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY to do frequent heart checks. Our circumstances demand our attention, don't they? Our trials consume our thought life. We become fixated on our problems. That was true for Paul in Corinth. That was true for the new believers in Thessalonica. And that's true for us today. And, with the heart of a pastor who has been through his fair share of trials, Paul prays this beautiful prayer:

May God reorient your heart.

To what?

To the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ.

When we begin to grasp the love that God has for us, nothing else matters.

See the God who fashioned you in your mother's womb – who set you apart and chose you as His own before you ever drew your first breath. Turn your heart to the God who loves you in spite of the fact that you continually fall short of all that He deserves. See the steadfastness of Christ who didn't waver once in his mission to save you from your sin. See him there on the tree, bearing your guilt and shame so that you could be forgiven. Turn your heart to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ!

When you SEE Him and your heart RECEIVES this unconditional love, all of the problems that shout for your attention are quieted.

It's not that His love magically makes our problems disappear – it's that an understanding of His love puts our problems in right perspective. Paul knew that there was nothing that was more important for the church than that they see and comprehend this truth. In Ephesians 3, he prayed this prayer for yet another of his churches:

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸**may have strength to comprehend** with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and

depth,¹⁹ **and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.** (Ephesians 3:14-19 ESV)

We are such needy creatures. Our hearts are so distracted and distorted. We need God to miraculously reorient us to see and understand this love.

Karl Barth was perhaps the most influential theologian of the 20th century. He had a mind that was head and shoulders above his peers. He was once asked in an interview to briefly summarize all that he had learned. This brilliant theologian summarized a lifetime of study in one sentence: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

As we recommit to prayer in this church, I want to ask you to join me in praying that the hearts of our people would be fixated on the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. Pray that for yourself. Pray that for me. Pray it for the person sitting next to you.

Paul needed prayers like that. The Thessalonians needed prayers like that. Orillia needs prayers like that.

May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. (2 Thessalonians 3:5 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.