

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

The Lord at Work 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Introduction

The prayers of the apostles tell us what mattered to them as spokesmen for the Lord. Such prayers reveal what should matter to us and what to expect from the Lord's activity in our own times.

When we pray, we are praying to the Lord. It's helpful to know we are praying in line with the kind of work that the Lord does. Paul's words point us to the Lord at work in his life and in the lives of those he writes. I've underlined the multiple references to the Lord.

¹ 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.

1. Gospel Advance (1)
2. Faithful Protection (2-3)
3. Scriptural Obedience (4)
4. Heart Devotion (5)

1. Gospel Advance (1)

Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you,

Paul regularly asks the churches he planted to pray for him and his fellow missionaries in their efforts to spread the gospel. He was not a self-dependent missionary, but a God-sent, God-empowered, God-dependent, God-glorifying messenger of the gospel.

Colossians 4:3-4

³ At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— ⁴ that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

Ephesians 6:18-20

¹⁸ Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, ¹⁹ and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an

ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

Philippians 1:12

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

Pray that the word of the Lord may speed ahead—may run
And be honored—be glorified
Like a runner surging ahead in the race and winning the prize.
But what does that mean in relation to spreading the word of the Lord—the gospel?

As happened among you—*the word of the Lord is glorified when those who hear it believe it, trust in it, and are transformed by it.*

1 Thessalonians 2:13

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

The gospel succeeds because it is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1), not because we are such awesome messengers of it.

Whatever good behavior and reputation the messengers of the gospel have comes from God's power at work in their lives. That makes their message credible.

Beyond that, the gospel works in the hearts of unbelievers to convince them that these things are so. It may seem extraordinary that mere words could bring about such change—until we remember that God created the entire universe by speaking. He creates new life in us the same way. He uses His Word to create faith in our hearts and bring life to our souls.

With Paul, we pray that the gospel word of the Lord will spread like wildfire, that it will surge ahead and make new advances. And that as it does, that it will meet great success. That it will be received, that it will transform, that it will be glorified as the powerful truth it is, instead of being mocked as trivial, powerless, foolish, even harmful.

Applications

- Where do you see the word of the Lord belittled and vilified? What would happen if you earnestly prayed for the word of the Lord to surge into those arenas and be glorified?
- Who are some persons in whom you have seen the gospel have great

success so that it is glorified for its transforming power?

- Who are the persons and places you are praying will receive the word of the Lord, bringing it the glory it deserves through transformed lives? (Share the names of those people and places with the person next to you so that they can pray with you.)

2. Faithful Protection (2-3)

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.

“Wicked” literally means out of place; in the moral realm it refers to those who behave in an outrageous, unreasonable way; it was commonly used to refer to outrageous acts against property—those who vandalized and destroyed, like what you see in a mob out of control

Paul knew what it was liked to be attacked by such rabble.

“Evil” is more than just being bad, but being malicious and vicious—desiring and working harm against others

Significantly, Christ and the apostles call the devil the evil one. And those still under the his evil power behave the same way.

The statement, "For not all have faith" reminds us that the cure for such evil attitudes and actions is faith in Christ. The gospel transforms us from the hurtful people we are by nature into those who bring positive benefit and kindness to others.

Titus 3:1-3

¹ Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, ² to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. ³ For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

This transformation comes from being reconciled to God, whose own character is faithful and good.

2 Thessalonians 3:3

But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.

In contrast to those who don't have faith and are not faithful, the Lord is faithful. He makes

us stable and able to stand firm. Being established refers to the inner strength God gives. We are “strong in the Lord and the power of his might,” as Paul puts it in Ephesians 6.

He is also faithful to guard us against Satan’s spiritual attacks from the outside. This is exactly what Christ prayed for His disciples in John 17:15:

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

Our protection comes from the Lord. It is the kind of work He does on behalf of His children, and it is right for us to pray He will protect us and others in line with His faithful character and perfect will.

Applications

- What fears keep you from setting the gospel loose to do its work among unsaved people you could reach?
- What dangers to other believers call for you to pray for their protection?
- In what ways do your attitudes and actions show confidence in the Lord’s protection?

3. Scriptural Obedience (4)

And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.

We often think of obedience to the commands of God purely in terms of duty. The question is, how do those who are sinners by birth and by choice become obedient children of God? There are those who try to reach obedience by pure willpower and personal discipline. This is the stock and trade of religions of every variety.

But the confidence of Paul and his missionary companions is not in the willpower of the Thessalonian believers. Their confidence is in the Lord to bring about obedience in the lives of these young believers. It is His lifepower in them that makes the difference.

Their confidence is something God has proven to them. Paul's words literally mean "we are persuaded." He and his coworkers have been convinced by the evidence. They've seen it happen everywhere the gospel has gone.

The Thessalonians are already obeying the commands handed down to them, like a military commander gives orders to the soldiers he leads. Paul is confident they will continue to do so. He uses the same term in verse 6 when he gives further command to them to keep away from those living in

idleness contrary to what the apostles had taught and modeled.

As we endeavor to disciple others to follow the Lord's commands, it's helpful to them to express our confidence in the Lord that they will do the right thing and obey. They don't have to be forced or threatened. The Lord is at work in them to make them glad to follow the commands they've received.

Applications

- What areas of disobedience to God's commands do you need to turn over to the Lord to empower you to do right?
- Whom can you encourage to keep on obeying the Lord's commands with confidence they will do so?

4. Heart Devotion (5)

May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Paul prays for God to continue working at the deepest level of who they are: to direct their hearts, that is, to open up the way and remove any obstacles. You remember that one's heart refers to the core of who he or she is, not just emotions, but mind, will, and disposition.

Where does the Lord shepherd our hearts?

Into the love of God—both His deep, Fatherly love for us and our resulting love for Him that inspires our daily living.

Into the steadfastness of Christ—His endurance of everything His saving work required, culminating in his death on the cross. He remained under the load to fulfill the will of God and to rescue us. Those whose faith is in Him take on the same kind of endurance—they deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Him. They bear up under the load for the sake of the kingdom of God. They persevere whatever comes their way. The Lord guides their hearts into this path.

Love and endurance mark those who belong to God, so we pray for the Lord to be at work strengthening our brothers and sisters to continue this lifestyle rooted in the very core of who they are.

Applications

- In what ways has the Lord directed your heart to sense God’s love for you and to grow in your love for Him?
- What examples of endurance can you attribute to the Lord’s work in your life or in the lives of believers you know?

Conclusion

1. Gospel Advance (1)

2. Faithful Protection (2-3)
3. Scriptural Obedience (4)
4. Heart Devotion (5)

The Lord continues to be at work in these strategic ways to this very day. Let us pray that He will continue to be at work in our lives and in the lives of the people our lives touch.

Closing Song: All Praise to Him

Summary of Applications

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- Who are the persons and places you are praying will receive the word of the Lord, bringing it the glory it deserves through transformed lives? (Share the names of those people and places so others can pray with you.)
- What fears keep you from setting the gospel loose to do its work among unsaved people you could reach?
- What dangers to other believers call for you to pray for their protection?

- In what ways do your attitudes and actions show confidence in the Lord's protection?
- What areas of disobedience to God's commands do you need to turn over to the Lord to empower you to do right?
- Whom can you encourage to keep on obeying the Lord's commands with confidence they will do so?
- In what ways has the Lord directed your heart to sense God's love for you and to grow in your love for Him?
- What examples of endurance can you attribute to the Lord's work in your life or in the lives of believers you know?