

A Pastor's Desire For God's People

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

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In 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5 Paul says, “Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, both that you do and will do the things we command you.” Now Paul prays for them saying, “Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ.”

In this text, we have a picture of Paul's pastoral heart for the church in Thessalonica. It's interesting that in chapter 1, he encourages the discouraged, because they were being persecuted; in chapter 2, he enlightened the shaken, upset and disturbed by instructing them what events had to take place before the return of Jesus Christ, because others had falsely said they were in “the day of the Lord”; then in chapter 3, he exhorts the disobedient. So in chapter 1, we have encouragement for the discouraged; in chapter 2, enlightenment for the disturbed; and in chapter 3, exhortation for the disobedient. So we move from the doctrinal section of Paul's epistle, chapters 1-2, to the practical section, chapter 3.

Now in chapter 3, Paul first exhorts them, from verses 6-15. And then there is the conclusion of the epistle with the benediction in verses 16-18. But in verses 1-5, which we'll study today, Paul expresses his desires for the Thessalonian believers. It's a pastor's wish or longing for God's people. In it we learn the important marks of a healthy church.

There are five things that Pastor Paul desired for his church and that I desire for our church, Revival Christian Fellowship, as well. The first thing that should mark a healthy church is that Paul wanted them to be a praying church, to pray to the Lord. Verses 1-2 say, “Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith” or “the faith in Christ.”

Notice that Paul starts this last chapter with the word “finally.” In Paul's writings, it appears quite often. But it doesn't mean that he is concluding; it means he's wrapping up his last chapter. So he's not saying, “Finally I'm done”; he's saying, “Finally I have a few more things to say.” Some modern translations render this “For the rest....”

In Philippians, Paul uses the word “finally,” and then he goes on for two more chapters. I like that because I've said, “This is my last point,” and then I go on for another five points. I had someone come up to me after the service and said, “You lied.”

I said, “What did I lie about?”

“You said it was your last point, and then you gave four more points.”

I've learned not to tell you when I'm going to stop. I don't announce my conclusions anymore; I just land the plane, and everybody knows we're home.

So Paul isn't stopping; he's got a lot to say in this chapter. It's a hinge that takes us from the doctrinal section to the very practical section.

Notice that Paul is talking to the believers; he said "brethren." This would include women, as well.

What Paul asks of the church, I would ask for as well. He said, "Pray for us." Paul wanted the believers in Thessalonica to pray for him. This is an amazing thought. The phrase "Pray for us" in the Greek actually conveys the idea of "Continually surround us with prayer," because it's an imperative in the present tense. So Paul is saying, "Will you pray for us continually that we might be surrounded by your prayers?" I like that picture of a church praying for its pastor and pastors and doing so continually and surrounding them with prayer.

The thing that amazes me is that the great Apostle Paul, with all his great intellect, with all his gifts and abilities, with all his ministerial experience and with all of his talents still felt a humble need and dependence upon the prayers of God's people. Yet the believers in Thessalonica were only baby Christians. They had only been saved for a few months. And here's the great Paul the Apostle humbly asking them for their prayers.

Sometimes people get the idea that God hears pastors' prayers before their own. Not so. I have people come to me and ask, "Pastor John, will you pray for me? I know if you pray, God will hear your prayer and He'll answer." It was as if I had some little red phone on my desk with a hot line to heaven. "Hey, God, this is Pastor Miller."

Your prayers are just as effective as mine. God doesn't hear me any quicker than He does you. We all come on an equal basis. We all have equal access. The Bible tells us to "Come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

I'm not saying I won't pray for you, but my prayers aren't anything special. My prayers aren't anything different than any other's prayers. So you can pray for one another. The Bible says we should "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

But it's amazing to me to see Paul in his humility—"Pray for us"—and in his dependency—he prayed that their prayers would be from God's people, sustaining them.

I believe that God answers those prayers. I believe in the power of prayer, as Paul evidently believed in the power of prayer. I believe that for this church to be healthy and strong, for God to bless the ministry, that the ministers need the prayers of God's people. The church doesn't need the criticism or the attacks; we all need to work together.

When I was a little boy growing up in Sunday school, we used to have to hold hands. I didn't like that part, because there were girls in the class. We would then sing a song that went,

"When we all pull together how happy we will be. When our work is God's work and God's work is our work...." Then we would let go of hands. I liked that part. We need to bring that into the adult service.

When we pray together, when we work together, when we pull together, how happy we will be. This is a pastor's heart and desire for the church: that they would pray for him.

And when Paul said, "Pray for us," he was indicating Timothy and Silas and evidently the other apostles as well. So even though they were apostles and they had these great gifts and abilities, they were dependent on the prayers of God's people.

Now notice what Paul asked the believers to pray for. He is very specific. He had two requests. First, in verse 1, he asked them to pray for the success of the message. Second, in verse 2, he asked them to pray for the safety of the messengers.

First, Paul asked them to pray for the success of the message. Verse 1 says, "Pray...that the word of the Lord..." I like that phrase. It's repeated all through the Scriptures. It's talking about God's Word. Many times prophets would preach and say, "Thus sayeth the Lord" or "This is the word of the Lord." So what they preached and proclaimed was the Word of the Lord.

Paul asked for prayer that "The word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you." So Paul wanted the Word of God to be free to run its course, and he wanted it to be received in the hearts of God's people and be glorified.

When he uses the phrase "may run swiftly," he is using the imagery of an Olympic runner.

There is one thing I don't do and that is run. When I see people running I think, Why? We have cars. Why would you purposefully go out and run around the block? You should skateboard, ride a bike or motorcycle or something. But God bless you if you're a walker or a runner.

But in those days, Greek athletes would run, and that's the imagery. He saying, "May God's Word be free to run its course. May nothing hinder it. May it have its way." So Paul is praying for the spreading of the Word of God; that God would bless the preaching and teaching of His Word.

I like the fact that Paul says "the word of the Lord." A pastor is given one task, one duty that is primary. And that task is the preaching of the Word. Nothing more, nothing less. Nothing added, nothing taken away, nothing substituted. A term in the New Testament used for preaching is "herald." The Greek word is "kérussó" or "to proclaim."

In those days they didn't have newspapers, the news or the Internet. So a herald would go into a town square and unroll a scroll. He would say, "Hear ye, hear ye. The King says...." He would read the proclamation or preach or proclaim. He would herald what the king had to say. He couldn't take away any words, he couldn't add any words and he couldn't substitute any words. He was unable to change it in any way, because it wasn't his message. He was just a

herald; he just proclaimed it.

And that's what the preacher is supposed to do. He is to open the Bible, read the Bible, explain the Bible and apply the Bible. Nothing more, nothing less. Just preaching the Word of God. Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2-5, "Preach..."—or "kérussó" or "herald"—"...the word!" And how was he to do it? "Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching." And why should he preach the Word? "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you...fulfill your ministry." So his ministry is to preach the Word.

That's what apostles did and that's what pastors are to do: "Preach the word!" And pray the Word would run its course.

As the leaders and pastors of Revival Christian Fellowship, we covet your prayers; that God's Word would go out with clarity, with authority and would run its course.

Some of you may not know that God has opened doors for a radio ministry, and in the last 10 years we have developed an extensive radio ministry. God's Word from the pulpit here at Revival is going out all around the world.

I had a couple tell me that there are three radio stations in the Philippines, and Revival radio is on all three of those stations daily. All around the world, God's Word is being heralded, being proclaimed. So when you pray for the preaching of God's Word, to run its course, to have its way, God is using you in partnership with the pulpit of this church as we preach and proclaim the truth of God's awesome Word.

Paul says, "...that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified." The word "glorified" means that it is "received" and the affect it has on the hearer.

Second, Paul asked them to pray for the safety of the messengers. He asked that the message would be blessed, and that God would watch over and keep safe the messengers. Verse 2 says, "...and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men." Paul had a specific group of individuals in mind. It could be the false teachers back in chapter 2, verse 2, who were teaching about "the day of the Lord." Or it was more likely that Paul was writing from Corinth at this time, Acts 18, where Jews opposed him and were coming against him. So he was saying, "God protect us from these evil men."

He calls them "unreasonable." It means "out of place, perverse." These men are out of bounds and "wicked." Paul says, "For not all have faith." So he is praying that God would protect them and God would watch over them.

God can use the weakest Christians to pray for God's messengers. How important that is. Even these new believers in Thessalonica were putting a hedge of protection around the

preachers as they proclaimed His holy Word. So I like this idea of the congregation partnering with the preaching of the Word by their intercessory prayers for the pastors.

The second thing that Paul desired for his church was that they trust in the Lord. Every pastor wants the people in his congregation to trust in the Lord. In verse 3, he says “But the Lord is faithful.” Don’t miss the intended contrast and play on words. Paul ends verse 2 with “...for not all have faith” and then, in verse 3, he says, “but the Lord is faithful.” There are two variations of the same Greek word. He’s doing a play on words. Not all men believe in God, have trust in God and in the body of belief we have as Christians.

“But the Lord is faithful.” I like that statement. What the Lord does is He will strengthen you, and He will keep you from evil. Implied in that statement is that you can trust a faithful God.

Yet some say, “Well, God hasn’t been faithful to me. I was diagnosed with cancer.” “My child just went through a divorce.” “I lost a son.” “I lost a daughter.” Just a few weeks ago, in my family, we lost one of our nieces. My sister’s daughter was killed in an automobile accident.

You ask, “Where is the faithful God? Why did God allow this to happen?” I want to assure you—as Paul assures the believers in Thessalonica—that God is faithful. You can trust Him in the darkest, deepest valley. David said in Psalm 23, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” So God is going to be faithful; He will never disappoint you or let you down. You can take that to the bank.

So Paul is trying to encourage these believers. Before he exhorts them, in verse 6, he wants them to pray for him and the other apostles. And he wants them to trust in the Lord.

Then, in verse 3, he says, “...who will establish you...”—or “strengthen you” on the inside—“...and guard you...”—or “protect you”—“...from the evil one.” That would be protection from Satan on the outside. Whether that is from evil in general or specifically from Satan doesn’t matter; God will be faithful. God will strengthen you. God will protect you. So Paul is trying to encourage them through difficult times.

In 1 Corinthians 10:13, the Bible says, “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” You are not alone. Many times when we are walking through a deep, dark valley, we feel all alone. But the Lord is with us. God is faithful. He always provides.

In 2 Timothy 4:18, Paul says, “The Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom.” These were perhaps the very last words ever penned by Paul the Apostle. He was in prison when he wrote these words. He was brought before Nero at trial, and was found guilty of treason against the Roman government. He was taken out of the city and beheaded. Yet Paul said, “The Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom.” And God did just what Paul said He would do. The moment Paul’s

head was severed from his body, he was wearing a crown in the presence of the Lord. So God is faithful. Jude 24 says, "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy..."

So pray, trust the Lord and number three, obey the Lord, verse 4. He wants an obedient church. Paul says, "And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, both that you do and will do the things we command you." Paul's "confidence in the Lord" dovetails with verse 3. Since "the Lord is faithful," will strengthen you and keep you from evil, Paul is confident in the Lord, verse 4, "concerning you, both that you do and will do the things we command you." I like that.

The apostles had preached the Word, and some of that preaching involved commandments. God's Word has commandments for God's people. If you are a child of God and Jesus is Lord, it means that you must obey Him. We must keep His commandments, not in order to be saved but because we are saved. We obey Him not to earn salvation but because it's the fruit of our salvation. Paul said to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:11, "These things command and teach."

So if you are preaching, *kérussó*, proclaim, heralding God's Word, it will have commandments. Many times when we're reading different passages, I'll mention that they are in the imperative tense. That means they're not a suggestion or recommendation but a command. And when God commands us, He enables us to keep His command. So preaching involves the commandments of the Lord.

In Philippians 2:12, Paul says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." That doesn't mean we work for our salvation; it means living out what God has given to us by His free grace. So God's people are to obey God's Word.

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus gave the great commission, which is "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." We sometimes forget the "commanded you" part of the great commission. Not only do we go and preach the Gospel, but we are supposed to also "make disciples." We are to command them to follow all the commandments that Jesus gave to us. We are to pass down the Word of the Lord. This is the job of the preacher, and this is the response of the people of any congregation.

Are you obedient to God's Word? Every Sunday the Word of God is read, preached and taught at Revival. What a blessing it is to have a Bible-teaching church. But the question is "Do you obey? Or did you just listen?"

"That was a great message this morning." Well, what do you do about it? Do you put it into practice?

The fourth thing Paul desired for his church was that they love the Lord, verse 5. He says, "Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God." Paul is again looking to the Lord Jesus to direct them to the love of God. "Direct your hearts" means that He clears the path, and that

nothing hinders or gets in the way of you loving God.

There is a question in many scholars' minds that I find interesting. Is this "love of God" referring to God's love for us, is it referring to our love for God or is it referring to God's love in us for others? It's referring to all three. The reason it isn't clear and that the text can be interpreted as being any of the three is because all three are what Paul had in mind.

What Paul prays for the people in Thessalonica I pray for the people in our church. I pray that the Spirit of God would draw them into a deeper understanding of God's love for them. "The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell." God's great love for you is infinite; it's eternal and everlasting. It's unconditional.

But you are also to respond to that love by loving God. When you understand the love of God, your response should be to love God back, to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind." What more could a pastor want from a congregation than a people who love God? People who are strong knowing God loves them, and they love God. A group of people who love God and are tied in very closely with the love of God. Our love for Him encompasses our reverence for Him and our respect of Him. It's called "the fear of the Lord." You can't separate love for God and the fear of the Lord; they go together. If you love Him, you will respect Him and want to obey Him.

Paul says in Romans that "The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit." This is the love we have for others, even for those who are unlovely. Even for our enemies. This is God's love flowing through us.

So may God help you to know that He loves you, you love God in return and may God's love flow through you by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The fifth thing Paul wanted is that they look for the Lord, verse 5. He said, "...and into the patience..."—or "steadfast endurance"—"...of Christ" or "waiting for Christ." The idea is that as we wait for Christ to return, we are waiting on Him to give us strength and the power to live the Christian life. There's nothing more important than for you to daily live in expectation of His return. The Lord could come today. We don't often think about that, but every day we get up, we should think, Is this the Day? Some of you are saying, "I hope it's the Day! I have to go to work, and I'm not happy with my job. And I just got a bunch of bills in the mail."

Heaven is not just a destination; it's a motivation for how we live. It's a real place. Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you." And then He made a promise. "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you..."—that's the rapture, in John 14—"...to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." We should live every day expecting Christ could come today. Biblically, theologically, doctrinally that's the case. I believe in what's called "the imminent return of Christ." Nothing has to happen before Christ comes for the church.

Isn't it interesting that Paul didn't say "waiting for the revelation of the Antichrist"? Or "waiting for the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet"? Or "waiting for the moon to

turn blood red”? No; Paul said, “We’re waiting for Jesus Christ.” I believe those things will happen, but I believe that our focus needs to be Jesus Christ coming for us, because that’s what He said to do. “Wait for me. Look for Me. Expect Me.”

So I believe in the imminent return of Christ for the church, His bride. That’s called a pretribulation rapture. And Paul’s words support that concept. He didn’t say we’re looking for anything but Christ to come. And while we’re waiting for Christ to come, He would strengthen us in the inner man, and He would preserve us as we wait for His coming.

Also in 1 Thessalonians 4:18, Paul said to “comfort one another with these words.”

I want to wrap this up with five things. A church that is healthy prays for their pastors. A church that is healthy trusts in the Lord; they live by faith. They are obedient to the Lord; they obey God’s Word. They are loving the Lord, resting in His love and loving others. And they are looking for the Lord Jesus Christ to come back.