

Final Words
2 Thessalonians 3:1-5
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It's an honor to be with you, Columbia Presbyterian Church, this morning. I have great memories of your support over many years with Faith Christian Fellowship in Baltimore City where I served for 38 years, and your support for Baltimore Christian School that existed for 18 of those years. And it's just an honor to be asked by Randy and the leadership team of CPC to bring God's word on this last Sunday of 2019.

Well, what words should be said as it is the last Sunday of this year? One of the things I appreciate about the apostle Paul is at the end of his letters, he often concludes with very tight summary words that emphasize his key thoughts. Ephesians 6, he says, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power." Or Philippians 3, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord." Now, in Philippians, it's like one of those preachers that has two "finally's." You know, they preach another 15 minutes and then they say another few words. And then he says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, noble, right, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy, think about such things."

I really like 2 Corinthians 13. It's a very tight "finally." "Finally, brothers, goodbye." And then he says, "Aim for perfection. Be of one mind. Live in peace."

Well, today, I thought it would be good for us to think about some of the final words of Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3. And consider the word of the Lord, 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5.

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

The word of the Lord. Let's pray.

God, we thank you that you are not silent. We thank you, Jesus, that you are the living word of God and that you speak and that you show truth and grace in the flesh. But we thank you now that you have given us your living word through these pages and through your Spirit. Use them now to speak to us and transform us. We ask, Holy Spirit, that you would speak them afresh. Make them come alive in our hearts and lives. Strengthen, equip, encourage your people here at CPC. In Christ's name. Amen.

As many of you know, Baltimore has been suffering through many challenges as a city. Yesterday, a paper reported another deadly week with a total of 342 homicides. And it commented that this holiday week brought no peace to Baltimore. Homicides include women and children. But besides Baltimore grieving record-breaking homicides for five years in a row, it has suffered the pain or corruption in its civic leaders amidst many other challenges.

When one of our mayors was in the process of recruiting and vetting a new police commissioner to help make our beloved city safer, the mayor said, "We need violent reduction faster than they are going down. We are not achieving the pace of progress that our residents have every right to expect." Our mayor then asked for more creative solutions in reducing homicides and other crime. "Crime is now spilling out all over the city, and we've got to focus," the mayor said.

One former initiative was to send a surplus of officers in waves to target hot spots, major traffic corridors, and violent repeat offenders in order to drive down violence. There is some present hope that surveillance planes might help. More creative policing may indeed help reduce violence and crime. But I

read an account of the most significant and creative crime reduction initiative. And it wasn't led by the police department. It was led by Christians in prayer meetings.

J. Edwin Orr, a former professor at the School of World Missions in Fuller Theological Seminary with a focus on church revival and renewal, presented account after account of the revolutionary social transformations that occurred in cities and even nations as a result of God moving through spiritual awakenings, conversions, and revival where God moved in response to believers joining together in prayer. He said, "There has never been a spiritual awakening in any country or locality that did not begin in united prayer."

He talked about the second great awakening that occurred between 1792 and 1800 that resulted in the abolition of slavery, public education, Bible societies, missionary movements, and many other social benefits. He spoke about the revival in 1905 where 25 percent of the student body at Yale were enrolled in prayer meetings and Bible studies. He spoke about the Welsh revival in 1904 where a former coal miner by the name of Evan Roberts prayed, "O God, bend me." In a prayer meeting, Evan spoke to 17 people and shared his sense of God's message. He told his fellow members,

"I have a message for you from God. You must confess any known sin to God and put any wrong done to others right. Second, you must put away any doubtful habit. Third, you must obey the Spirit promptly. And finally, you must confess your faith in Christ publicly."

All 17 had responded. Evan was encouraged to preach for more evenings over the course of weeks. Orr said, "Then the break came." The Welsh papers suddenly reported great crowds of people, the large church was packed with people trying to get in. Shopkeepers closed early to find a place. A reporter was sent down, and he described vividly what he saw, "A strange meeting which closed a 4:25 a.m. And even then, the people did not seem willing to go home." And British summary, "I felt that this was no ordinary gathering."

On Sunday, every church was filled. The movement went like a tidal wave over Wales. In 5 months, there were 100,000 people converted throughout the country. The social impact was astounding. Judges were presented with white gloves, not a case to try, no robberies, no burglaries, no rapes, no murders, no embezzlements, nothing. District counsels held emergency meetings to discuss what to do with the police now that they were unemployed.

In one place, the sergeant of police was sent for and asked, what do you do with your time? He replied, "Well, before the revival, we had two main jobs: to prevent crime and to control crowds as at football games. Since the revival started, there is practically no crime, so we just go with the crowds." The counsellor asked, "What does that mean?" The sergeant replied, "You know, where the crowds are. They're packing out the churches." "But how does that affect the police?" The sergeant said, "We have 17 police in our station, but we have three quartets. And if any church wants a quartet to sing, they simply call the police station."

The revival swept Wales, Britain, Scandinavia, Germany, North America, Australia, Africa, Brazil, Mexico. Orr says it always began through a movement of prayer. Who would imagine that praying believers could have more capacity to positively reduce crime than a police department? Believer, your prayers have more capacity to impact the health of this great city, this metropolitan Baltimore, this Columbia, and the world than you know.

Now, you and I can't make a revival or mass conversions happen. We can't put up a tent and a sign that says, "Revival This Week," and think that we can make the Holy Spirit work some kind of magic. But we can be aware of what God uses to bring revival and social transformation, and what God uses to advance His gospel disciple-making movements. We can do our part. We can get the wood. We can build the timbers. And we can seek the fire from heaven to come down.

And so, here in 2 Thessalonians, Paul understands the primacy of prayer for the church and for the advancement of the kingdom of God. God through the apostle Paul speaks some final words to these Thessalonians about prayer which are most applicable for us as we finish 2019 and enter the new decade of 2020.

While Paul gives some final words here, he only gives one command. Only one imperative we find in these last verses. Pray. "Finally, brothers, pray." Finally, sisters, pray. All the other words in these five verses describe the what, the how, and the who in our praying. In this call to prayer, we find the substance of our prayers, the assurances of our prayers, and the person for our prayers.

Paul gives us the substance of our prayers when he says, "Pray for us that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored as happened among you." And here, Paul is talking and referring to how the gospel took off in Thessalonica. The gospel movement is described in Acts 17. It's a very brief section of one of Paul's missionary journeys between the time of Philippi and Berea.

Thessalonica was this proud capitol Roman province of Macedonia. It had a population of about 100,000. It was a major busy flourishing intersection of trade. It was a free city led by local officials. The majority of the population was polytheistic. It worshipped many gods in Greco-Roman pantheon and also the imperial cult. And it had a sizeable population of Jews. As Paul's custom, when he arrived in that city, he would seek out a Jewish synagogue where he might find an audience to share the good news of Christ as the Messiah.

So, this is what happened in Thessalonica. And it says that Paul reasoned from the scriptures for over three Sabbaths, explaining and proving that Jesus was the Christ who had to suffer and rise from the dead. And it says in Acts 17:4, "And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women." But it also says that the Jews were jealous, and they formed a mob of wicked men of the rabble, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, a recent Jewish convert. And they dragged him off to the city authority shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down." Paul had to leave Thessalonica for his life. And he went to Berea, the next city.

But the amazing thing here is that just in the space of three weeks, three Sabbaths, the gospel seed, this little obscure gospel seed apparently rooted an unbelievable message. Who would have thought that this message about a nobody son of a carpenter from Nazareth who gathered around Him a bunch of nobody, blue-collar fishermen followers, a despised tax collector, a militant zealot, and other unschooled nobodies, that this Nazarene lived and was executed on a despised Roman cross and then was purported to rise again, and to somehow declare God's promise, the Messiah of the ages. It was such a ridiculous bunch of baloney for most religious listeners. But to others, to those like Lydia of Philippi who the Lord opened her heart, it was the power, it was the dynamite of God to change everything.

And this gospel seed got planted into the fresh soil of Thessalonica. In just three weeks, it took off and became a vibrant gospel witnessing church. That's what happened. The seed of the gospel got planted. And it was through prayers.

And so, Paul exhorts and calls and commands these Thessalonians as he apparently was writing in Corinth to pray that such would happen again and again and again. "Pray for us, that the word of the Lord would speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you." He prays that the Lord's word would speed ahead, that it would enjoy unhindered progress, that it would be honored, and that people would acknowledge its truth and embrace God's offer of salvation. John Stott says of this, "He now personifies the word as a runner." The imagery also occurs in Psalm 147 where God talks about His word "running swiftly."

The Thessalonians are then asked to pray that this gospel may run well, may run fast, and that wherever it goes, it would have a glorious reception. The closest contemporary illustration of this today is the Baltimore Ravens with quarterback Lamar Jackson who is breaking all kinds of touchdown passing

records and rushing yards records with what can be described as his otherworldly time-stopping fakes. It really has been a wonderful, surprising, and gloriously fun season of football for our great city that knows deep sorrows. But Lamar Jackson will say that it's about his teammates. And football experts would say it is about the magnificent culture of the Raven's organization who have not only created a family culture, but who were willing to change everything to engineer the entire team around the strengths and gifts of its leader.

What would it look like for the church to experience that kind of Ravens culture spiritually? What would it take to be part of the gospel where it's speeding ahead and enjoying unhindered progress and being received and honored among people? What would that church culture look like?

Paul informs us that the central thing in that culture is prayer. It is the church and prayer. It takes God's people in united, prevailing, kingdom-advancing prayer. It doesn't take strong people's prayers or rich people's or smart or spiritual people's prayers. It just takes weak and humble people's prayers, broken cisterns, weak vessels.

I like what Paul Miller's word says. "Jesus opens his arms to his needy children and says, 'Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden. I will give you rest.'" And he says, "The criteria for coming to Jesus is weariness. Come overwhelmed with life. Come with your wondering mind. Come messy."

And so, Paul says, "Finally, brothers, pray for us." And one of the things I appreciate about Paul is he readily acknowledges his need for prayer. He is not a self-contained, self-reliant macho apostle man who doesn't need anyone. He knows he is weak. He knows he needs others. And he knows he especially needs the prayers of others. And he speaks about his hardships in Asia where he says, "we were beyond our ability to endure." "We felt the sentence of death. But on him, on Christ, we have set our hope." "And he will continue to deliver us as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on behalf of the gracious favor granted to us and the answer of prayers of many." Did you catch that? While God delivered, while God saved, it was God who responded to the prayers of believers. Favor was granted.

Believer, your prayers make a difference. Your prayers, even your weak prayers, make a big difference in the ears of the almighty. The almighty is moved by your prayers. In Deuteronomy 4, it says, "What other nation is so great to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?" It's been said that when we work, we work. But when we pray, God works.

Paul practiced what he preached. And so, he asked for prayer. He opened the first letter of 1 Thessalonians with the words, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers." He opens with his commitment to praying for the Thessalonians. And he ends the second letter with, "Finally, pray." It's like these two bookends in his letters to the Thessalonians. And prayer is that central gospel engagement that advances the kingdom.

If we had time, I would like to show you how the whole movement of the gospel, advancing disciple-making movement, church-planting movement in Acts all began through movements of united prayer. It always began with a movement of concerted prayer.

You know, there's a reason why Jesus commanded His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the power from on high before they were sent out. It is the mission of Jesus. It is Jesus's mission. And He is determined that His mission will move forward through His peoples' humble dependent praying.

A few years ago at Faith, we had a church retreat, a leadership retreat. And in that retreat, I shared an experience that I had when I was in high school. I graduated from Randallstown High School, a public school, back in the day. But a group of us became Christians through the ministry of Young Life. And we started to have a passion for sharing Christ with our school. And Randallstown at that point was 60 percent Jewish; the principal was orthodox Jewish. But somehow, we were able to hold a prayer meeting before school started in the assistant principal's office. Every Tuesday morning, we would gather together, just a bunch of high schoolers, and we just started praying. We started praying big prayers. We didn't know anything better. We'd say, you know, we have a big God. Let's pray.

So, we started praying. And we started to pray for the hardest students that we thought would never come to Christ to come to Christ. Now, while we were in school, we actually didn't see those students come to Christ. But my sister in law who was in that group and not my sister in law at the time, she tracked them and eventually, these became believers.

But the other thing that we prayed for was that God would give us the opportunity to have the whole school hear the gospel presentation. And so, we prayed. And somehow, the school leadership allowed us to hold a mandatory assembly just before Easter. And they gave us the ability to organize and lead that assembly.

We had a friend who was at Columbia Bible College who was leading a music group, and he came up. And along with him came a former gang member from New York City who became a Christian. And music was played. A testimony was given. The gospel was presented. An invitation for students to give their lives to Christ was given, and many students actually gave their lives to Christ. And it got a number of teachers very upset that we had violated the lines of church and state. But the vice principal came up to us afterward and said with tears streaming down his face, "This is the greatest Easter gift you could have ever given to this school."

And so, I shared that. And by the way, you who are high school students or in school, you need to recognize that God will hear your prayers and do big things through them if you trust Him and just pray.

As I shared that, a deacon came up to me or an elder came up to me and said, why aren't we doing this here at Faith? I said, well, I'd be happy to meet with you guys if you want to get together in the early morning to pray. So, that's what happened. On Tuesday mornings from 6:30 to 7:00, we started to meet just for prayer for outreach. We just started to pray for people that were far from God that they would come to know Christ. And our youth pastor eventually came, and he said, I'm so excited about this. Let's do this every day.

Anyhow, we start having these prayer meetings every morning, Monday through Friday, just praying for outreach. And I have to say that we didn't really see a lot of things happen initially. But all of a sudden, we started seeing things take place. Like, there was a student nearby who didn't know anybody in our church. He was actually a student teacher in Baltimore. He just saw the sign and started coming to church. And he started to come to small group meetings. And he eventually gave his life to Christ.

Another young man, a graduate from Micah, also started coming and gave his life to Christ. A woman, a married woman with her husband from Iran, was coming. And over time, she gave her life to Christ and was baptized in the church. God responds to the prayers of His people.

Paul tells the Thessalonians to pray that the message of the Lord be spread rapidly and be honored. And he asks for prayer, that they would be delivered from the wicked and evil men, for not everyone is of faith. A big part of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is that he is correcting the wrong teaching that this young church was receiving about the second coming of the Lord. Some were saying that He already came, and you've been left behind. It was very disturbing for this young church. And so, Paul is correcting that.

But there is a spiritual warfare that takes place as we pray and as people are coming to Christ. And so, he is encouraging people to enter this spiritual warfare to pray. Paul is big on realizing the spiritual forces that will seek to thwart the movement of the gospel and to seek for us not to pray.

Believer, do you know that you hold the power to thwart spiritual evil forces from hurting others? Your weak prayers have supernatural power to protect and even keep wicked forces at bay? Jesus prays in John 17 before He goes to the cross, "Holy Father, protect them," His disciples, "by the power of your name." And here, Paul is encouraging believers to join him in praying for the protection of the disciples.

But Paul also calls us to pray with assurance. There are wicked and evil men. "But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord

about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.” Paul could have said, church, you need to pray. You need to know the power of your prayers. You need to know the people and the leaders need your prayers. But if you don’t pray, if you forget to pray, if you drop the ball, you need to know that God will not drop the ball. That the Lord is faithful. The Lord is faithful. He will strengthen and protect you. You may not pray, but Jesus will always be praying for the rapid spread of the gospel. He will always be praying for you. Hebrews 7 says, “He always lives to intercede.”

If you don’t pray for the rapid spread of the kingdom, God’s kingdom is not going to fail. He will have His kingdom. Paul says we have confidence not in you, but in the Lord that God’s word will not fail. It will reach its mark. Lives will be transformed. So, if you choose not to pray, God will still work. He will work through you. He will work with you. Or He will work around you. But He will work. The Lord is faithful. We have confidence in the Lord.

But Paul expresses assurance that God will work with and through His people even though at times, they look weak and are defeated. And Paul knew that, that He who began a good work in them would complete it. And Paul saw this firsthand with the Thessalonians. He was with them for only three Sabbaths, and yet, God made this little baby church become a thriving kingdom advancing church. Paul was celebrating the fact that even while he was prevented from shepherding and nurturing them in their faith, God wasn’t. God was faithful.

And so, we find finally that Paul gives a substance, not only the substance of what our prayers are about and gives us the how of our prayers and assurances in our prayers, but finally calls us to fix ourselves on the who of our prayers. And he reveals in his prayer for these Thessalonians, “May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ.” One commentator said this. “The love of God is the grand motive and principle of obedience. This love of God must occupy our hearts. The heart is irregular in all of its workings. God alone by his spirit can direct it into the love and keep it right.” We find this intensified focus when Paul says that God might direct your hearts and to love God in Christ’s perseverance, His steadfastness, His steadfast patient endurance.

You know, Jesus was on the cross. And it says why He remained on the cross. Because of the joy set before Him. And who was that joy? Who was the joy set before Christ? Why did He endure the cross and despise the shame? It was redeeming lost sons and daughters to the Father, fulfilling His Father’s mission. It was you. He stayed on the cross for you and me as we have given our lives to Him.

Jesus is on the cross and He’s thinking about us. And Paul is saying, you need to think about Christ’s perseverance. You need to think about how deeply in love this amazing God is for you because that is what’s going to drive a praying person, a praying church. “If we say I ought to pray,” as one said, “I will soon run out of motivation quick. The flesh is too strong.” But if you recognize the love of God for you, if you know in your hearts how deeply He’s in love with you, you will be compelled to pray.

So, what do you do with this? What do you do with this encouragement? “Finally, brothers,” and sisters, “pray.” Well, it’s amazing, isn’t it? I confess to you that I’m a weak man in prayer. I often rely on my own strength, my own abilities. And God often brings me to the end of myself, and I exhaust myself. And then I have to repent and say, Lord, why am I not a man more of prayer?

We have started this thing called BALM, Baltimore Antioch Leadership Movement. It’s about multiplying Christ-centered cross-cultural leaders for church planting movements and church renewal. And part of my job is serving metro Baltimore seminary with church planting and urban ministry and teaching. But when I recrafted that vision, there was no place for prayer. And then God just convicted me. You’re going to do this? You’re going to do this in your own strength? And fortunately, God gives us the ability to repent.

I need to be reminded of the words of Jim Cymbala, the pastor of Brooklyn Tabernacle, who wrote *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*. He says, “God is attracted to weakness. He can’t resist those who humbly and honestly admit how desperately they need him. Our weakness, in fact, makes room for his power.”

CPC, these final words, you are a bright light in this city, in this region. And I have to encourage you to pray. Pray for your brothers and sisters in the churches of this region because many of them are struggling in deep ways. Jack Dennison wrote a book called *City Reaching*. And he says,

“While the church is rapidly growing in Asia, Africa, South America, but in the U.S., the church is in decline. Leaders are saying that America is not a Christian nation but a mission field. It has been reported that 80 percent of the churches in America are in decline. And every week, 72 churches are closing their doors. Because of disillusion, discouragement, and burnout, 60 percent of pastors who are pastoring today will not retire as pastors. They will find something else to do.”

These are the realities of our spiritual warfare. And I experienced some of that in our last presbytery that you're now part of. And I'm very grateful that CPC is in the Chesapeake Presbytery. But in the last presbytery, I was informed that we have to cut our missions budget by 45 percent for next year. And it kind of is reflective of what I've just expressed to you, that churches are struggling. Churches are in decline. We need revival. We need revitalization. We need renewal.

It's not a mystery, however, of what the core characteristic of a revived, revitalized church looks like. It looks like a praying church. It looks like people united in prayer, joining with the Father, joining with the Son, joining with the Holy Spirit in the advancement of His glorious kingdom.

We have the ability to make a difference. You have the power to make a huge difference. What would it look like if we put together prayer teams that were praying for lost people, lost neighbors, lost family members, and people gathered together and just started praying? And churches gathered together and leaders gathered together, pastors, and would gather together to pray for God's movement among our region, to see the gospel speed rapidly forward without hinder. It would be a wonderful thing to be a part of. It would be a lot of fun. Let's be part of that. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for Paul's words here to the Thessalonians. Lord, as he writes this letter, these final words, we are reminded that it is only through your power that anything happens of redemptive work. God, work through Columbia Presbyterian Church. And I pray that you would bless them, that you would encourage their prayer ministries, and that they would be able to experience a great advancement of the kingdom. And we pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.