

## **Prayer for Steadfast Love – 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5**

*Pastor Tim Rech, Clearcreek Chapel*

### Introduction

This evening we take time again to consider yet another type of prayer and the biblical priorities embedded in it. A number of other types have been preached since last September and I hope you are taking them to heart and applying them to your prayer life. And most of all, I hope you are striving to pray accurately and in a way that reflects what is really going on around us and where God wants to take us in this life.

If we are honest, our prayer lives can be weak and feeble. Our prayers easily lose the priorities reflected in the Bible and gravitate towards a collection of “take away this” or “give us this” as if suffering and trouble are an accidental intruder into our lives.

### Its Setting

Before we consider our text, it is helpful for us to survey 2 Thessalonians. Given it is a short letter this makes our task relatively easier than if we were to plunge into a book like Romans or the Corinthian letters. This survey is especially needed to see the frame through which we will view the priorities for the prayer we will be studying.

The letter is written by Paul and is from he and some familiar New Testament brothers; Silas and Timothy. Paul is writing to a church of which its people are enduring a number of problems. These problems essentially fall along the lines of the three chapters.

Chapter one shows the reader a discouraged church – discouraged by heavy persecution and affliction from opponents of the gospel – those who refuse to obey the one and only offer for salvation from heaven. Now in many ways, we can only observe for we essentially know very little about such trouble. So it is important that we pray throughout our time together so that God may give us understanding. Paul then gives to such an afflicted church what it needs – encouragement. He thanks God for them in 1:3 for what he has observed in them (faith growing and love increasing) and in 1:4 tells them how he boasts of them in the other churches for their patience and faith in the face of great affliction. He then prays as the chapter closes that God may make them worthy and fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith.

The second chapter shows us a disturbed church – disturbed by recent teaching counter to God approved apostolic teaching. They were being told the Lord had already returned and they missed it - a false teaching that was shaking them greatly. For when under great affliction in the present, the longing of God’s people for the future, namely the Lord’s return, is of primary importance. Question hope in the minds of a suffering people’s and they will be shaken. Paul once again moves in close, reminds them of the truth about the Lord’s coming and the reality of what will occur to the enemy and to those who refuse to believe the truth. He then gives thanks for them again – this time it was because they were God’s beloved, chosen by Him to be saved through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth,

with the result being that they would share in the glory of Christ. “So stand firm to what you have been taught brothers and sisters”, says Paul in 2:15. “Stand fast and hold to the truth you have been taught.” He then prays for their hearts to receive comfort from the Father and the Son in 2:16-17. It seems logical that if there is eternal comfort from God in their salvation, might they not also receive comfort in their disturbed state? Present comfort is drawn from eternal truth.

And also note he prays that their hearts may be established in every word and deed – saying and doing must agree else their testimony would be lost – hearts must not hear and speak the truth only, but yield to it as well. Guarding the truth is vitally important and one of the best ways to do so is to put it into practice.

And in the final chapter of the letter, we see a distressed church. For they were not only a church facing problems from the outside through a rejecting and twisting of the truth, but they faced problems from within – this was and is the most difficult kind. Persecution from outside the church is to be expected but when trouble arises from within; we are often caught off balance. “How could this happen?” we say. And until we recognize its sources (bad hearts being a primary one) and take steps to deal with it according to God’s prescription, the problems will only linger and grow.

Idleness and general disobedience among some of the brothers was causing the trouble. The church was having difficulty confronting the problem and was in danger of discouraging those who were living in obedience. Paul clearly direct church leadership in 3:6-15 on how to deal with the disobedient and instructs the obedient to “not grow weary in doing good”.

So this is the landscape of the letter. However, tucked between Paul’s praying for comfort for this church and instructing its leadership to confront disobedience in the church, are five verses that give the Thessalonians something else they desperately need. Here we find our faithful and active God in between a prayer request from Paul and a prayer for steadfast love from him for the church. Let’s read 3:1-5:

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

#### A Prayer Request

With a “Finally”, Paul begins his final line of thought in the letter with a prayer request. Remember he had not finished his apostolic work but rather went on from Thessalonica to other parts of the Mediterranean and Europe. Many think he was in Corinth at the time. Paul’s desire was that God would use him to repeat in other places what had happened among the Thessalonians; the gospel preached and received, new churches formed, and fruitful lives resulting. The gospel in Thessalonica had been unhindered in its proclamation and then honored among them.

Paul earnestly asks for the help of the church by praying for gospel work. The request almost seems like an intruder to the flow of the letter. However, the opposite is true. Praying for the work of the gospel and its proclaimers actually encourages, comforts, and strengthens those who pray – the very thing Paul prayed for them in 2:16-17. Setting aside their difficulties to pray for others keeps God’s people focused on the bigger picture of kingdom building. It also gives them perspective for those who carry the gospel to unreached peoples for they are often suffering greatly in the work. It is one reason why we pray regularly for our missionaries at the Chapel.

Note that Paul’s request is for an unhindered gospel – one that continues to move across the land like a wave or conquering army and be honored by those who would hear it; either by receiving it or at least acknowledging it.

The prayer request is a reminder that our Christian work is not ultimately accomplished by human plans and effort – we must trust in the Word since it is the only thing that can accomplish God’s work.

And the reason for the prayer request is simple – the gospel and its heralds are almost always confronted by wicked and evil men – men who are in active opposition to what is good and behave in an improper and unbecoming way. They were not only the pagans but the “religious” as well. In fact, the Jewish leaders were often the most active opposition to gospel truth and sometimes violently so. Paul notes their problem; they lack faith and are not of the Faith. How can they respond any differently? They do not possess faith.

#### A Faithful and Protecting God

Then Paul gives a contrast in verse three. He says “But the Lord is faithful” unlike the evil men who had no faith. It is interesting that he did not say the brothers are faithful in making this contrast. By all accounts they were faithful believers but Paul is pointing to the Lord who is greater and perfectly faithful.

The Lord had done a great work among them and was now active in stabilizing and protecting them in the difficulties they faced. And He is ultimately was protecting them from the evil one. Satan is scheming with subtle and gradual methods; using the world and its attractions coupled with the natural bent of the human heart to distract and sidetrack God’s people from their walk with Christ. They would easily succumb to the harmful intent of Satan if God did not establish and guard. It is a protecting God who is faithful.

Note that Paul’s confidence in verse four is rooted not in the believers, regardless of how well they have or are currently walking in the faith. But rather his confidence is rooted in God himself. God will produce obedience in His people today and in the future. It is an important distinction. God does not save and then we take it from there. Rather it is God who establishes and protects us in our faith and obedience. Now it is certainly true we play a role – it is an act of our new God-given will to obey. We have been given the power and the understanding to do so. However, we often do not realize how dependent we are upon the Lord. We are weak people. Paul puts no confidence in people to obey God’s Word but only in the Lord alone. This is important as we look at Paul’s prayer in verse 5 and his command in 3:6.

#### The Prayer (3:5)

Paul then prays in verse five, “*May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.*”

### *Its Frame*

Each of Paul’s prayers has a contextual frame as must our prayers. We have already identified much of this frame in looking at the overall letter; a discouraged, disturbed, and distressed church needing encouragement, comfort, and reminders of God’s Word. The first four verses of chapter three complete the frame, showing the evil one is working behind the scenes and opposing the gospel and God’s people at every turn. But God is also active; faithfully working in the midst of His people and in the trying circumstances in which they find themselves.

### *Its Foundation*

And the foundation of Paul’s prayer seems clear. The Lord is faithful – He would establish and guard His people in the Faith and move them to obedience. Therefore, there was reason for confidence but not in them. They were weak and helpless and needed grace and strength. No, the confidence was because God was on the scene, faithful and active in their lives. He indwelt them and was directing their hearts to what they needed. And Paul also stood on the fact that God’s hand moves to the biblical praying of His people

### *Its Activity*

So after requesting pray for ministry, Paul now prays for the Thessalonians for maturity. The first characteristic of this prayer is to whom he addresses – “the Lord”. Now it is easy to quickly read past this but we must stop to notice that “the Lord” is the Holy Spirit. We know this because He is distinguished from the Father (“God”) and the Son (“the Christ”). We also know that Christian maturity is the work of the Spirit.

Paul prays that the Holy Spirit would “direct”. This directing activity is solely the work of God and involves a straightening of what has become crooked.

Then notice what needs to be directed and straightened out – their hearts. Now wait a minute – what kind of prayer is this? Are there not bad guys all around and an evil one who is scheming against them? Are there not brothers around them who are disobedient? Yes, but that is not Paul’s priority. Heart direction is what is required. The external problems will always be with us in this life (God promises that). And it is good and acceptable to pray about those things. But the heart is what the Spirit is working on – a properly directed heart is the means by which He will establish and guard His people. Understanding this immediately corrects the priorities of Christian prayer.

### *Its 1st Aim – The Love of God*

So let us see what Paul asked the Lord to direct their hearts unto – the first is to the love of God.

The love of God can be viewed in two ways; one is in an active sense which is our loving God and a passive sense which is our being loved by God such as we saw back in 2:16. The immediate context of

this prayer points to the active sense – that practical love which results from obedience to God and His Word. However, the passive sense comes into play as well and we will come back to it briefly.

Now in thinking about the act of our loving God, we must remember that love is still a problem for the believer. For it does not come natural. Even as a new creation in Christ, the saint is totally dependent upon the Spirit to continue and develop his or her spiritual health.

So what does this loving God look like? First there needs to be a delight in and a desiring after God in our spirit. A continuous pursuit of Him is the primary activity in our hearts and God is the supreme object of our desire. And in the process, we attain the highest form of happiness that can be achieved.

Such a pursuit in our hearts can only result in external acts of obedience. We do His will and not get in the way of His will. We do His will in obeying the New Covenant imperatives of the Bible – obeying the Law of Christ. A sincere love of God expresses itself only through obedience – and this extends to our loving of other people in tangible and external ways. Failure to obey God will grieve the hearts of His people.

Love is practical and active. It may be accompanied by lofty words but not the other way around. Love compels us to humbly comply with God's will. Love of God is our duty and is careful to please Him and hates to offend Him.

Love of God must also be accompanied with the right attitude. It cannot be expressed in a compulsory spirit of obligation (a chore to simply carry out – remember His commands are not burdensome) but with a “meek and cheerful submission to God's will.”

Now the heart of the Christian can easily stray to pursue other affections. We have all been there – our first love tends to continually switch to different object. But it bothers us and we ought never to be content with divided pursuits. We cry out to God that it not be so and to “unite our hearts.” This very distress shows the true Christian is conscious of his weak love and gives evidence that we possess a new nature. We see where we fall short in our love for God only by seeing it in His Word and experiencing God's love in our hearts and from His people.

So Paul's prayer is fitting. We must continually be directed into loving God and regain its freshness and devotion. Our inner man must continually be renewed and refocused so that the idols of our heart are rejected.

The idols of our lives are not only problem. The fears and cares of this life also pull us away. Does anyone here have any of these? The Thessalonians certainly did. And how about our becoming obsessed with our sins and our failures before God and forgetting all that God has done and is doing in Christ? This can only lead to a loss of assurance and joy and an excessive focus on ourselves.

All of these things were a problem for the Thessalonian church. Asking for the hearts of these believers to be directed and redirected into the love of God was the priority in his prayer for them. Loving God continually was critical to their standing fast by faith against persecution, false teaching, and disobedience in the church. Their love needed to be constantly exercised towards God in obedience to

His Word or else it would shrivel and as a result, increase towards the world. They needed to check themselves constantly for affections which displaced their affection towards God.

And how might else we be directed into the love of God? Well, remember the passive sense of the love of God. It is to continually assure ourselves of the love of God toward us. Remember Paul's prayer in Ephesians that we know the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love and in Romans 8 how nothing can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord". Continually meditating on the truth and the evidence of the love of God towards us works hand-in-hand with our active love of God.

### *Its 2nd Aim – The Steadfastness of Christ*

The second aim of Paul's prayer is to direct their hearts into the steadfastness or the patient endurance of Christ. Like the love of God, the patient endurance of Christ is equally important to the continued maturity of the Christian. Note: we will use the terms steadfastness and patient endurance interchangeably.

If we truly examine ourselves, we will find very little steadfastness in our day-to-day lives. The smallest disruption or opposition to our plans and ways cause frustration, anger, and discouragement and an impulse to give up. As a result, we fail to honor God and our growth in Christ is interrupted. A patient endurance in all things is critical to our walk with Christ because if you have not noticed, our obligation and duty to God is like swimming upstream against the current of this world and our sin nature. It runs against all things that are popular. Unless we patiently endure and not give up in our duty to obey, how can we lead fruitful lives pleasing to God?

### *So They Could Labor*

Paul prays for steadfastness for the church for three reasons. The first is so they could continue to labor. Paul will tell the church a few verses later to not grow weary of doing good and to continue to obey in the face of idle and disobedient people in the church. They will need endurance so that they can fulfill what God commands them to do – to labor on in a self-sacrificing and self-denying way.

### *So They Could Suffer*

They also needed steadfastness so they could endure suffering. Remember the level of persecution they faced. God had called them to suffer meekly and quietly, recognizing and accepting what God was allowing into their lives. We can be sure they were tempted to shirk obedience to soften or avoid such suffering. Although we probably cannot relate to their level of suffering, I think we understand this. For example, have you ever received opposition to your Christianity from your family or in the workplace and then been tempted to compromise or perhaps "smooth" the truth to keep the peace?

### *So They Could Wait*

And there was a third aspect of their need for steadfastness – it was so they could wait. God’s people are to be a waiting people – waiting because they possess a sure hope of future promises being fulfilled. When life is hard and pushing back at them from all directions, God’s people look to the future for salvation and relief from present suffering. This requires patient endurance for without it, how can a man or woman of God wait properly for God? Even after doing the will of God to the fullest extent, the Christian must then wait for God’s will to be done. The Thessalonians understood this as we saw in chapters one and two – they clung to the promise of Christ’s return and were called to wait. God’s test was whether or not they possessed a posture of waiting and such it is for us – patiently enduring all things so they could wait God’s way.

We must remember that God’s timing is infinitely better than ours. Losing our patience reveals much – it is sin, for it rejects divine timing for what we think is superior timing. It rejects God’s authority. And practically speaking, impatience causes people to make mistakes with longstanding consequences. Biblical examples abound; remember King Saul and other foolish Old Testament kings? Who can forget Abraham’s example with Hagar? Paul understood how delicate the Thessalonian’s situation was at the time of writing. They needed steadfastness in their present troubles. Such patient endurance would keep them in an attitude of self-denial, quietly submitting to God’s will.

And as what was true with the love of God, the Lord must direct the hearts of His people into the steadfastness of Christ as well. It is again divinely enabled and comes to us by staying close to Him in His Word, humbly obeying Him, and praying as we see our weakness and inability to possess it on our own.

#### *Their Perfect Model*

Now this prayer that the Spirit would direct our hearts to steadfastness is pointing us to a certain quality – the perfect quality of Christ. We can look at this in two different ways (both are in view). One was His total obedience to the Father no matter the cost while the other is His own patient endurance towards those who have a hard time obeying. Either way His model is not only helpful but is the only one in which to go. Paul pointed the Thessalonians to Him and so must we point ourselves and others to Christ.

He patiently endured with disobedient men in all circumstances of his earthly ministry. At every turn, He was opposed and accepted abuse. Yet he patiently endured it and in turn was patient with all. He served everyone regardless of fatigue;

- Fed the multitudes although He needed rest
- Took all ministry opportunities; served the crowds continually, met with the women at the well, and met Nicodemus, his disciples, and others at night
- Continued to patiently teach His disciples even though they were slow to learn and to recognize Him

And how can we forget His words upon the cross, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* (Luke 23:34). In suffering He always responded with good.

And Jesus patiently endured in all things before the Father. Here are just a few examples from other Scriptures:

As recorded in Luke 22:42, Jesus prayed in the Garden immediately before going to the cross:

*<sup>42</sup> saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."*

Philippians 2:8 shows us the extent of Christ's obedience:

*<sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2:23 how Jesus in suffering trusted the Father and responded to evil men:

*<sup>23</sup> When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*

Hebrews 2:10 tells us that the founder of our salvation was made perfect through suffering and three chapters later in 5:8 tells us:

*<sup>8</sup> Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.*

And even today, Jesus patiently endures. He is waiting for His enemies to be His footstool and for the completion of time and history so He can return. Hebrews 10:12-14 tells us:

*<sup>12</sup> But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, <sup>13</sup> waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. <sup>14</sup> For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*

This is the steadfastness of Christ – the steadfastness for which the Thessalonians and all generations of Christians were called. God's people are to be like God's Son. So Paul prayed for just that.

Paul prayed that their hearts may be directed to two things; the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. Given their situation, this is what the Thessalonians needed most. It was a top priority in praying for them. And Paul also connects the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. Their steadfastness would be proportional to their love of God. The more loving of God through acts of self-sacrifice and submission to Him and meditating upon God's love for us, the more apt they would be to patiently endure anything that came their way. Christ's love for the Father was perfect and therefore He was completely steadfast. So loving God in an active and tangible way leads to a Christ-like mindset which produces a patient endurance in His people.

So what we can take away from Paul's priorities in his prayer for steadfast love?

Reflect and Respond



- When you pray during times of trial, is praying for your heart and the hearts of others the highest priority? Or do your prayers focus mostly on the removal of the suffering?
- Is praying for steadfast love in yourself and in others a priority in your prayer life?
- Do you see that love of God expressed in obedience and patient endurance are what God desires in the lives of His people? These are the Christ-like characteristics God intends to produce in His people
- God's people need to continually be directed back into the love of God and steadfastness of Christ – if it is not fostered, it will wither
- Let us be confident in the Lord about one another – not confident in ourselves but in the Lord – He is faithful and active in our lives to ensure we are established and guarded and increasingly lead lives of obedience