

*Pray*  
2 Thessalonians 3:1-5  
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Children ages two to 4<sup>th</sup> grade – that is not right. Children ages four to 1<sup>st</sup> grade may be dismissed for children’s worship. I was just taken somewhere, just a whole other level.

Well, it is good to be with you this morning. And just as they were singing of the deep, deep love of Jesus, we are gathered to worship Him, and how we can take these rich, deep truths of the gospel. And we wed them with music and we really are lifted. We’re lifted up to a higher plain to be mesmerized and marvel at God’s glory.

Please turn with me in your Bible to 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5. Today, we are transitioning. These five verses transition from Paul’s discussion that he’s done so far in this letter discussing matters concerning the coming of Jesus where now he’s moving into his concluding thoughts for the letter which returns to a specific matter that he began to address in the first letter to the church in Thessalonica. But he finishes there again to a matter of some people in the community who were choosing to be idle instead of working. So, in this transition, we see Paul’s request for prayer, we see Paul giving the believers there in Thessalonica a confirmation and encouragement. And likewise, we see Paul himself praying for them.

So, let’s read this passage together and open our hearts to the Lord’s direction from His word.

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]

This is the word of the Lord. Pray with me.

Father, make this passage, make these words of Paul’s request and Paul’s prayer be our understanding of your beauty, of your glory. May we receive it with rejoicing, and likewise, help us to walk in understanding and obedience that we would walk in action just as much as we seek to grow in wisdom and knowledge. Help us to bring those two things together, our faith and love and our hope into how we live this out as your community here, as your church. We need your help in this. We need your grace and your mercy for it is abundant and it is beautiful. And we pray this in Jesus’s name. Amen.

On May 7, 1945, General Alfred Jodl was representing the German high command. And on that day, he signed the unconditional surrender of all German military forces. The following day, millions of people and dozens and dozens of countries – particularly Great Britain, United States, other countries of western Europe – celebrated VE Day, Victory in Europe. From the beginning of the war to its end, life became rearranged. Preparations were made. Battles were fought. And through all of it from the beginning to the end, everyone longed for it to come to the end. Life continued, of course, in the midst of their waiting. Sons who once played with rocks and sticks were trained to use bullets and grenades. Teachers put away their books and picked up rifles. Scientists who marveled and contemplated the wonders of God’s creation and contemplated physics later collaborated for bombs destruction. Presidents rallied countries and asked very much from their citizens. Mothers raised sons and later buried men. Little daughters waved goodbye to their young fathers, and then as young women welcomed them home happy to see them, but potentially not as young anymore, and certainly not as innocent.

How do we wait for an unknown end when you only have today? How do you order your day in view of that unknown end? In today’s passage, Paul uses images that allude to the Olympics, the Olympic

games, as well as some military functions. Although Paul sometimes uses such metaphors, Paul never conflates the mission of God as a war among nations. As a matter of fact, in Ephesians 6:12, Paul frames that the way is not between flesh and blood but against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Jesus Himself in the Gospel of John, chapter 18, spoke of His kingdom not being of this world, and if it was, His disciples would've taken up arms and they would have fought for His kingdom.

Here in this transition, Paul is encouraging the believers at Thessalonica and Christians through the ages as we read God's word the encouragement to live in the present as well as the hope of the future. And he invites us into practices that become an important component of our life of faith in Christ, particularly means of connecting with God in prayer and connecting with one another as God's people. And we see in this affirmation, this confirmation that Paul gives here in the middle, we see that the Lord is faithful. He gives us an anchor point; He gives us a foundation. And we see it's because the Lord is faithful that we can, as an advent people, as a people who are waiting, we waited for the coming Messiah and we wait for His return. As an advent people, one of the key components of our corporate life, our family, fellowship, and worship, our individual worship is that we must pray.

So, today just a simple structure for you that want an outline and you are maybe freaking out that the page is blank. I did that on purpose because how often do we come to prayer and we don't know what to say? We don't know what to think. We don't know what to ask. And yet, our hearts are troubled, our hearts are full. Sometimes, we don't know how to untangle all the fullness that's inside of us, and yet we come to a blank page. We come to a blank moment of space to enter into that communion with our God.

So, Paul invites us to pray. Verses 1-2, we're going to look at how he asks them to pray for us. And then verses 4-5 where he turns that and he prays for them, prays for you. Pray for us and pray for you.

First, verses 1 and 2, we see Paul bringing his conclusion. He's addressing the church, this phrase, "Finally, brothers." We've seen this prior earlier in the letter. We've also seen in 1 Thessalonians. It's not necessarily the last point. All preachers like to say it's their last point, and it's never their last point, right? So, Paul's not saying, this is my last point. It's more of a saying of, I'm coming to the end. So, these are my concluding remarks, my final comments. And what does he do? He calls their attention to pray. Pray for us.

Now, he's talking about himself and he's talking about Silvanus and he's talking about Timothy, the men of his company who knew the Thessalonians, who were with Paul on his missionary journey, and so Paul is certainly inviting that prayer for him and his work but also those who are with him, "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." So, here, we see just two specific instances of prayer requests from Paul.

Now, it is an excellent Bible study to just go through all of Paul's letters and note the prayers he makes for people and the prayers that he asks for. Just observe, what are the conditions? What are the circumstances that he invites and petitions those prayers? It's a very uplifting and encouraging study to look at because we often pray for our circumstances to come to an end. And Paul is praying for the immeasurable riches of the grace to empower him to endure his circumstances for the glory of Christ and for the honor of God's name, for God's purposes and proclamation of God's redeeming grace. And he's engaged in this partnership with the churches that he interacts with, the churches that he's directly planting or maybe indirectly connected with. He is burdened that the Lord continues to meet them. And so, he prays for them and he asks for that prayer.

Isn't that wonderful that here is an apostle of Christ needing prayer. He never goes beyond a place of maturity where he has no need. As a matter of fact, Tim Keller in his book on prayer says this, "To pray is to accept that we are and always will be wholly dependent on God for everything." Prayer is that conversation with the one who can provide. It is conversation with the one who has the power and the ability. Prayer is that conversation in resting in the relationship of: we are the safest, we are the most

known, we are the most cared for when we are abiding in our God knowing his steadfast love and faithfulness which endures for generations, for a thousand generations, generation after generation, never ending faithfulness. We'll come to that more as we continue.

So, he prays specifically, though, here for the mission, that the word speed ahead. Here's that reference to the Olympics, this idea of running swiftly. Let the word be unleashed and run. Now, this is a very easy allusion to the Olympic games. But also, we see in Psalm 147:15, "He sends out his command to the earth. His word runs swiftly." Pray to that end, that God's word blankets the earth, His very presence is known, His very glory experienced. And that moves on into that second phrase, that it would not only speed ahead but that it would be honored, be esteemed, be gloried. And there's a subtle reference to the crown of the victor who runs the race, that sense of being honored in the receiving of it. But Paul is asking for prayer that in their mission, Christ would be known, that it would go forth, and that it would be received. And he makes this caveat, "as happened among you," calling their attention to the very work of God's word in their life. Just as you received, continue to pray that it may be received by others.

And Paul moves on to the second part of his prayer for them, for himself and his company, "that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men." This idea of deliverance is rescue, protection, guarding. And the wicked and the evil, the adjectives are very synonymous. He's not necessarily speaking of their character in so much as their hostility, their behavior, their conduct is out of order, it's not right, and that the evil nature of that is that hostility against the very action, the very mission of God's word going forward.

And so, he's not asking for prayer to be separated from the world, the wicked and the evil so to speak, but specifically in connection with the swiftness of the word. Often, the Psalms and the prophets talk about smoothing our path, bringing down the mountains and bringing up the valleys, make our paths straight so that the word may go forward. And this word is mighty to save. By it, we come to faith in Christ. Isaiah 55 says, "This word goes out." And when God's word goes out, it shall not return empty, but it shall accomplish that which He purposes. And His word shall succeed in the thing for which He sows. God's word is tied together to His character, His very being, His very truth. And for those to be proclaimers of that word is to be inviting people to know this truth, to invite them to know the way to be with God.

And he pivots because he recognizes, "For not all have faith." In some ways, it's a euphemism because a lot of people don't have faith. A lot of people in Paul's ministry didn't come to faith. And so, he needs to be dependent on God. He needs to reach out for the fellowship of the church to be encouraged, to have intercessors on his behalf. Because it's not easy. There are obstacles, there's challenges, and those just happen to be there. Things don't always go out way. And then it complicates it even more when people are intentionally subverting, intentionally thwarting, intentionally going against the very blessing that God is offering of Himself.

Now, Paul does something interesting here at the end of chapter 2 and at the beginning of chapter 3. In the original language, he puts these two words side by side to draw their attention. "For not all have faith." "Faith" is the last word of the sentence. And guess what the first word of the next sentence is? It doesn't work out in our English, but in Greek, the first word is "faithful." "Not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful." He's drawing our attention to that reality. We're going to be coming back to that because it hinges as a foundation for holding the prayers that he's asking for himself, prayers for the mission, and the prayer that he makes for the Thessalonians, the prayer for discipleship.

So, before we move on, just some questions. As the church in our context, it is easy to separate the mission from our existence, our daily lives, and we think the mission's out there. Now, we are to pray just as Paul is asking to pray for our missionaries. Pray for missionaries that you know and support. Pray for the missionaries that our church knows and supports. Pray for church ministries. College ministries are engaged with young adults who are trying to figure out life. Maybe for the first time their brain turns on, if you will, asking questions of meaning and purpose and of the Lord and of His word. Pray for the church

ministries that are meeting the needs that bring together word and deed as well. The needs are abundant. Let us be a people who pray.

Pray for your pastors, for your elders, for your deacons, and also pray for one another as you are engaged in God's mission. That's an incredibly important point because here just at the primary level, Paul's asking for prayer. Now, his context was the apostle. No one here is an apostle. So, how does that play out in your life? It's for you to be aware of and embrace the fact where God has you to recognize your place in God's mission and for you to pray for one another as well. Remember, to pray is to accept that we are and always will be wholly dependent on God for everything. If we can't be saved in our own boasting, in our own wisdom, in our own riches, we can't think about going out on mission and thinking we can do that for others in our own power, in our own money, our own resources. We have to start recognizing our wholly dependence. We must pray to the one who calls us in that mission.

And so, Paul, as a loving parent does, he's encouraging them here in this transition. He's giving them the good before he gives them, maybe, the bad. Now, Randy has the pleasure and the good fortune of giving the bad next week, I guess. Because Paul moves in those next verses about the correction. So, he's modeling something that's good. It's the encouragement, the confirmation, the assurance of where they are. But he's also setting up that sense of remembering where we are in mutual fellowship and partnership with one another. So, he moves from asking for prayer for himself to praying for them. And he prays for their discipleship, if you will.

Three things here. It's an awareness of the foundation, it's recognizing that there's action, and he culminates this with the proper motivation. So, we've already begun to briefly look at the foundation. We see there in verse 3, "But the Lord is faithful." What does he do? "He will establish you," strengthen you. It's a military term. It's kind of girding you up, placing you in a safe position, encouraging you, strengthening you. The Lord is faithful, and He will establish you.

And then he mentions that the Lord also guards against the evil one, this idea of protection, another military term a little bit. It's kind of the function of a sentinel, the function of a guard on patrol. It's recognizing that in the Lord's faithfulness, in His presence, He's with you and He's guarding against the evil one. Now, there is some discussion, is this against evil in general or specifically the evil one? I go the route of many English translations that it is a particular evil, meaning Satan the great adversary. That also makes sense in the sense of setting this up in contrast to the one who is faithful to deliver. The Lord will establish, the Lord will guard.

It is in this foundation, this confirmation, that we can even move into what Paul addresses in verse 4, "And we have confidence in the Lord about you." He's using a rhetorical tool at that point where he's saying, I am persuaded by your life. It's as if saying, I trust that you will do what I am about to tell you to do because I know you. I know that you know the Lord. I know that you will seek to follow Him. And so, Paul in his role as apostle, he's saying something quite bold here. He's saying that you are doing and will do the things that you command. Paul is not saying that his words are on par or even the word of the Lord. But he is recognizing that what he says is in accordance with the word of the Lord.

And so, for us as Christians, followers of Christ, we're submitting to the word that is going forward, that's swiftly advancing that it would be received and honored in our lives, in our families, in our corporate worship as a family here at CPC, the greater broader church as well that there is action that is connected with discipleship. It is not just sitting back and contemplating mystery. It is that, but it's not just that. It's not sitting back and just reading books because I'm ready to move on to the next thing. I figured that out. I got to move on to new information, something I've never heard before, or a new phrasing. No, it's taking what we already know and putting it into action.

Jesus Himself says, "If you love me, you will obey my commands." In the context of the relationship that we have as disciples is to necessarily be moved to action, that our lives are tangibly and visibly walking out the faith that we have of the gospel, the foundation that we believe that the Lord is faithful,

the reality that we know that His righteousness is ours. His forgiveness is granted, and our adoption is sure. Walking in that relationship, we seek to live out who we are in Christ.

Thirdly, it's our motivation. And this is the meat of the prayer that he says in verse 5, "May the Lord direct your hearts." This idea of direct, we see this elsewhere in 1 and 2 Chronicles. We see it in many of the Psalms this idea of the Lord leading us, guiding us. Our hearts become our seat of our emotions, but it's our seat, our place of how we live out our moral lives, it's our totality, the comprehensive nature of who we are is found in our hearts in this way.

And so, where is he saying, "May the Lord direct your hearts"? He says two things, and they're parallel with one another, "to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ." Now, what's interesting about this is you can ask the question, is he praying that the Lord direct their hearts to love God, or to lead their hearts to God's love? In some ways, it's both. That's the beauty of the ambiguity of the original language is to actually play off of both. But Paul most often in his letters is focusing on the object. He's focusing on the one that we have our love directed to, but it's totally defined and qualified by the one who loves. John talks about this in his letter, does he not? "We love because he first loved us." May the Lord direct our hearts to God's love that is found in Christ.

And likewise, he says, "to the steadfastness of Christ." The same question can be asked. Is this Christ's steadfastness, His perseverance, His endurance as He suffered affliction, or is it moving us to be steadfast in Christ? In a similar way, it's both, how we are moved in our hearts to look to Christ. And what is interesting about that as we look to Christ, the prayer that he is making is for us to lean on Christ.

Now, what's going on in the Thessalonian's lives? We've been talking about it for this whole series in the backdrop. They're suffering afflictions. They're suffering persecution. That could range from just antagonisms to mockery to other more severe cases of that. But in the midst of that suffering, Paul is praying for them similar to how Jesus taught His disciples to pray. Do you remember even in thinking about the evil on in verse 3 this resting in God? Recognizing God's honor, God's will, but also going to Him in prayer for His provision and for His power.

"May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ." This is the motivation for our discipleship. This is what empowers us to walk in the midst of our suffering. This is what gives us the strength and the courage to live in our day when whatever we are enduring has an unknown end whether it's the evil and wickedness that is in the world and we are fatigued, and our hearts are broken and torn by just watching the news, to being distressed and discouraged by what people offer as solutions to those things, to the very fears and anxieties that we face in our own hearts as we try to live each day when we wake up knowing that it might be there tomorrow.

So, Paul is praying for them. And the beauty of this is that the prayers that he's asking for God's mission and the prayer that Paul does for their discipleship is lived out in the community. For in the gospel, mission and discipleship is very rarely separated for we grow as we do, not purely as we know. So, as we grow in Christ, we are moving forward in the mission of Christ. And we find ourselves as we're engaging in the mission that Christ has for His church, we find that He's giving us the sustaining grace to grow us. Does that make sense? It feeds back and forth.

I'm not a rock climber. I'm a hiker. But right now, I'm enjoying several documentaries about rock climbing. And the beautiful metaphor about rock climbing is that they have intense trust in their equipment. Their very life depends on it. The other thing you notice when you're watching rock climbers is that they're crazy. But in that craziness, there is a certain sanity.

Now, if you've ever seen the documentary *Free Solo* by Alex Honnold, he's a premier rock climber. He recently – I guess last year or the year before – free soloed, which meant he climbed with no ropes, just a chock bag and some sticky shoes and just his hands. He climbed the face of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park which is one of the most glorious rock faces on the planet. And he doesn't free solo all the time. He usually just free climbs, which means ropes. But it's always been a dream of his to free solo this.

Now, this is where you insert that rock climbers are crazy. But what's unique about Alex is that what appears crazy to us is actually well thought out, well visualized, well rationalized. Now, I don't necessarily think that he has faith in anything except maybe himself, I'm not sure. But what's so powerful about that documentary whether you're on ropes or not, your very life depends upon what is anchored. So, if your ropes are anchored to the rock, then you're anchored to your harness. Now, you might fall, but you're not going to go anywhere. So, it's appealing to the certainty of the matter which allows you to walk that out. So, if you know that you're in a harness and you know that you may fall but you're only going to fall 10 feet instead of 1,500 feet, you're playing. You're taking some risks. You're contemplating your next move. You're looking and observing at the rock face of where to put his next foothold and that next finger hold. But the harness and the rope certainly are nice. The ropes are secure, and therefore, you are secure.

I would submit, though, when he's free solo that he's still secure. Now, there's a level of skill – don't get me wrong. But he trusts his shoes, he trusts his training because he doesn't go up willy nilly. He doesn't go up blatant. He doesn't want to die. He spent over a year with ropes learning his route, memorizing his moves. Even when he doesn't have a great grip – and this is what boggles my mind – rock climbers can push up on the ever so small crack. They can push up and stand on a bare rock face. Their toes are secure. They're pushing up, and they're fine. They're at peace. They're safe. They're crazy, but they're safe. So, whether it's ropes or even in his sense of free climbing, he's not trusting in himself. Now, there's a comfort with himself, his body, his skill level for sure. But he's trusting in what he knows to be true about the next move, about the integrity of the rock, the stickiness of the shoes.

And so, it is with us in prayer. Do we know the integrity of our rock? Do we know the faithfulness of the one we pray to? Are we assured of the one who calls us to pray to Him for His glory, but also to pray to Him asking Him to make His glory known that we would experience it more and more and more. But also that we would love God and love the things that He loves, that His glory may be shining forth, that wickedness and evil would go away, that His word would be sent out and not returned empty, that it would fulfill all of His purposes.

Bryan Chappell in his book *Praying Backwards* says this, "By praying in Jesus's name, we petition God to make our life shine for Christ's glory and eternity's purposes." When we are stuck in our day, that is where we are. The Lord invites us to pray for His provision for the day. But may we also be mindful of where our day fits into some unknown end of when He's going to return. As we wait, wait expectantly, wait with hope.

But we do this in a huge way. We certainly do this with His word as He talks about. But we do this in prayer as we pray for one another. We pray for God's mission. We pray for discipleship, that our foundation would be sure in Christ, that we would be doing His commands and action, and that our hearts would be filled by the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. And in the Lord's faithfulness, He's going to direct our hearts just as His word is sent out and does not return in vain.

Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, we rejoice that in our own testimonies, the mystery of our faith that by hearing your word, we know it to be true. To be awakened from death to life at the sound of your name, at the beauty and the glory of your grace in Christ knowing that our Savior who died for us is a Savior who provides for us. In giving us your Spirit, but also like you did in the garden, interceding for us. So, Lord, as you intercede for us, help us to abide in your word and help us to intercede for one another. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.