

Prayer for Fruit and Faithfulness in Difficult Days

2 Thessalonians 3.1-5

The end is near, but difficult days lie ahead. Christians are suffering, and need encouragement. Paul requests prayer for the apostles, then expresses prayerful confidence that God will protect them in trying days. There is much here for us as we face these difficult last days.

Prayer for Fruit (1-2)

- *For the word of the Lord to 'run swiftly' (1a)*
- *For the word of the Lord to be glorified (1b)*
- *For protection from the enemies of Christ (2)*

Prayer for Faithfulness (3-5)

- *For believers to know God's protection from Satan (3)*
- *For believers to hold fast to the truth of God's Word (4)*
- *For believers to have a 'tough hide' and a 'tender heart' (5)*

**2 Thessalonians 3.1-5**

Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you; and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

There is nothing like difficult times to make us pray. It happens almost instinctively. The death of a loved one. A newborn fighting for its life. Losing your job. A broken relationship. Hearing the doctor say “cancer.” Feeling unloved. Experiencing deep loneliness. Fighting despair and depression. Struggling with the grip of addiction.

I readily recall times I found myself staring into an abyss of the unknown, with events crashing around me like a tsunami. It felt like I was free-falling. I got alone. I talked with God – no, I cried out to God. I was lost. I didn't really want answers. I just needed Him.

If you've encountered a situation like that in your life, and reacted with a heart-cry to God, you know the unique comfort and assurance there is in prayer.

That's where we encounter the Apostle Paul in Second Thessalonians 3. V1 begins, “Finally” in the translation we read, but the word means ‘what remains.’ *This is all that's left to say...*

Paul has some closing instructions and exhortations for them, but first, he stops for prayer. These five verses are united as a prayer for Paul and his companions (1-2) and the Thessalonian Christians (3-5) to be successful in their spiritual lives, and be protected from Satan.

Whatever else you may be facing in your life today, we all can agree that its time to pray. For Paul, his concern is for the gospel: Everywhere he went, personal attacks and persecution arose. He prayed for power and protection. In the case of the Thessalonians, they were all so young in the faith: They were being oppressed, and false teachers had infiltrated the church and were leading some astray. Paul couldn't return, so he prayed.

In two days, Americans will elect leaders for the next few years. Apprehension about the future of our country is palpable. As Fred Chay of Grace School of Theology put it this week, our “nation's moral compass may make a seismic adjustment if a morally progressive party is in power and empowered to change and control all of our nation's government.” Time alone will reveal our fate, but on this we can agree: *It's time to pray.*

And that brings us to 2 Thess. 3. I submit to you that in these verses we find a beautiful blend of requests and refrains for the times in which we live. As you pray this week, let these requests be your *personal prayer*.

Prayer for Fruit (1-2)

Paul begins by asking the Thessalonian Christians to pray for him and the other apostles. Before we look at what he asked them to pray *for*, pause and consider for a moment:

What must it have felt like for the great apostle Paul to ask these new believers to pray for him?

I once attended a meeting of Dallas Seminary alumni at Moody Bible Institute. Chuck Swindoll was president of the seminary at that time; when he got up to speak, we expected the usual boasting about numbers of students or large donors to the school. Instead, he asked for prayer in the spiritual battles he and the school were facing. In that moment his humility shown. There is something deeply moving in Paul, a spiritual giant, asking for prayer.

- *For the word of the Lord to 'run swiftly' (1a)*

His first request is that *the word of the Lord will spread rapidly* (1a). The word translated ‘spread rapidly’ is an athletics term – τρέχω (tréchō) – to ‘run swiftly’ or to ‘make tracks.’ Paul pictures the gospel as an athlete in a race, running against other philosophies and worldviews, and says: Pray that it will win!

Think of it this way: Jesus said, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me* (Jn 14.6). When we pray for the gospel to ‘run swiftly,’ we are praying for the truth and the life of Jesus to win over the lies and death of sin.

The great preacher Donald Grey Barnhouse often closed services with this prayer: “Lord, dismiss us with your peace, except for those who don't know you; keep them miserable until they come to know the Prince of Peace.” If you don't know Christ as Savior, pray this prayer:

Lord, I'm miserable. I've been chasing the tired wisdom of this world too long. I feel your Holy Spirit drawing me right now. I put my faith in Jesus as my Savior. Thank you for your free gift of eternal life and peace.

- *For the word of the Lord to be glorified (1b)*

Paul's second request is that the *word of the Lord* (the gospel) *will...be glorified* (1b). The Greek word here is δοξαζω (*doxazō*), from which we get our English word *doxology*; it means to *magnify, honor, or praise*. How is the gospel *magnified*? What brings it *honor* and *praise*? When it changes the lives of those who receive it.

In simple terms, Paul's request is this: *Lord, may Your gospel to bring many to believe in Christ, then help them grow strong in their new faith.* That's a simple prayer, but when you pray it, you are 'joining hands' with God in the furtherance of the gospel.

Someone right now is thinking, 'I wish I could have a significant part in reaching the world for Christ.' Well, you can. Just pray this prayer for NBBC, pray it for our missionaries, and pray it for yourself: *Lord, cause Your word to run and be glorified in the ministries of NBBC and the missionaries we support, and in my life, too. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

- *For protection from the enemies of Christ (2)*

If you've ever seen this kind of change in a person's life, you know how awesome it is. God's love fills their life, and they have hope, joy, and a purpose. But if you've

seen that kind of change, you've also felt the attack of those who hate the gospel. Paul had, everywhere he went.

So in v2 he asks for prayer that they *will be rescued from perverse and evil men* who don't have faith in Christ. He prays for protection from the enemies of Christ.

Spiritual warfare is real. I've felt the enemy's oppressive presence right here in New Braunfels, sharing the gospel at the county fair or at Bussey's flea market, and in other countries as I have stood in front of hundreds of students and preached the gospel. Paul describes spiritual warfare graphically in Eph. 6: It's a pitched battle. To win it, you pray. You don't face Satan in your own power. When you take him on, you do it on your knees, in prayer.

Prayer for Faithfulness (3-5)

- *For believers to know God's protection from Satan (3)*

At this point in his prayer, Paul moves the spotlight from himself to the Christians in Thessalonica – from “us” and “we” to “you” and “your.” In vv 3-4 he does something we all do in prayer. We tell God what we know is true about Him. This is a prayer of confidence.

For example, I might pray, *Lord, thank you for being a faithful God, for never failing us; You strengthen us each day to live for You, and protect us from Satan's attacks...* Now, why do I do that? Am I afraid God will forget what He does for us? Is it to impress others with how much I know about what God does? No.

This is a prayer of confidence. These prayers are found throughout the Bible. Paul is expressing confidence that God *will strengthen and protect* the Thessalonians from Satan. He asks for prayer for the apostles to be protected from evil men, then declares, *And we know that God will protect you, too.*

The contrast between v2 and v3 is glaring: *Not all men have faith, but God is faithful...* When Satan arouses those without faith to persecute Christians, God will be faithful to protect us.

This is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, and this is a prayer we can pray for them – when our brothers and sisters in Christ are persecuted, that God would strengthen and protect them.

- *For believers to hold fast to the truth of God's Word* (4)

In v4, Paul adds that he is *confident in the Lord that they will hold fast to what he has taught them – translated into our day, this is confidence that we will hold to the truth of God's Word.*

How critical is this today?! Christians are besieged today by false teachings. Satan's two-pronged attack on us is simple: Persecution from those who hate the truth who are outside the church, and confusion from those who distort the truth inside the church.

Recently Hormoz Shariat of Iran Alive sent out an urgent request for prayer for protection of Christians in Iran. His

concern was not persecution from Iranian authorities, but confusion caused by Jehovah's Witness cult member who have been infiltrating the church. The church in America today is under assault from false teachings like Critical Race Theory, Works Salvation, Viewpoint Epistemology, Liberation Theology, and a host of other isms that ought to be 'wasms'!

When Paul met with the elders of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20), he told them to "be on guard for yourselves and all the flock" from "savage wolves" who "will come in among you" (28-30). The elders of NBBC are alert to false teachings, and we are confident 'in the Lord' that you will hold fast to the truth of God's Word.

- *For us to have a 'tough hide' and a 'tender heart' (5)*

If verses 3-4 are directed to our heads, v5 is directed at our hearts. As Thessalonian Christians faced opposition from both outside and inside the church, Paul prays that *the Lord will direct their hearts into the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ.* The Greek word translated 'steadfastness' (ὑπομονή, *hupomonē*) means *endurance* or *patience*. We might paraphrase Paul's prayer this way: *Lord, teach and enable us to love as God loves, and to be patient as Christ is patient.* Or perhaps this: *Lord, give me a 'tough hide' and a 'tender heart'.*

I submit that this is the challenge every Christian faces in these lawless last days. *Lord, help me to keep my heart 'soft and true' in an evil and angry world.* We tend to get hardened by all the anger, and are tempted to give up by

all the evil. We need ‘grit’ to stand true, and grace to show love.

Conclusion

As we head into a momentous week in the history of our country, may we all take to heart one thing: In difficult days, *pray!* Feeling anxious, feeling stressed? *Pray!* And when you’re tempted to give in, ask God to give you a ‘tough hide’ and a tender heart.

Two pastors were conducting a funeral together. One pastor was to read the Scripture and lead a prayer, at which time the other pastor was to give the eulogy. As the first pastor was praying, the pastor who was supposed to give the eulogy suddenly realized he had left his notes in his study two floors above the chapel where the funeral was taking place. He slipped up behind the pastor who was praying and whispered in his ear, “I’ve got to get my notes. Keep going until I get back.” That prayer was one of the longest in the history of that church, but eventually the pastor who had forgotten his notes found them and returned to deliver the eulogy.

Funny story, timely truth. The pastor said, “Keep going until I get back.” In essence, that’s what Jesus said to us: “I’ll be back, you keep on keeping on until I return.” To do that, we need to pray. It’s tough sometimes, because we don’t know when He’s coming and we’re not sure how much longer we can keep on keeping on.

But don’t worry. It won’t be so long that you have to give up. He promised. He said He’d be back. You can count on that. So pray, and keep on keeping on.

Digging Deeper

1. As 1 Thess. 3 opens, Paul is in an ‘attitude of prayer,’ having expressed thanks to God for them (2.13-15), and a wish-prayer for God to comfort and strengthen their hearts in 2.16-17. So it is not unexpected that he continues this approach in 3.1-5. The first two verses are a request for the Thessalonian believers to pray for Paul and his companions. How do you think it would have made the young Christians in Thessalonica feel for a great spiritual leader like Paul to ask them for prayer?
2. Paul’s prayer requests in 3.1-2 relate to the spread of the gospel, to which Paul was committed (see 1 Cor. 9.19-23)! The request that the gospel “spread rapidly” can be translated ‘run swiftly’; Paul wants the gospel to ‘have legs’ or ‘make tracks’ – to reach its intended audience. The request that the gospel “be glorified” (Gk. *doxazō*; English *doxology*) = to magnify, honor, or praise. Paul wants hearers to accept the offer of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. In v2, his prayer is for God to thwart the efforts of those who oppose the gospel. How does Satan seek to hinder the spread of the gospel (2 Cor. 3.3-4)?
3. Verses 3-4 are Paul’s expression of trusting confidence that the Lord will protect the ‘baby Christians’ in Thessalonica, and that they won’t stray from his teaching. You can ‘hear’ his concern in these verses: In their first year as Christians, they have been persecuted, and infected with false teachings. Have you prayed for a child heading to college or a new career where their faith will be challenged? Can you understand how Paul felt here?
4. Verse 5 is a prayer for the Lord to ‘incline our hearts’ to show love as God loves, and to endure in this life as Christ endured. Compare this ‘wish-prayer’ with the similar prayer in 2.16-17. Why are prayers like this especially timely for us when we are going through times of persecution or trial? Who do you know who needs this prayer right now? Would this be a good prayer for you to pray *for yourself*, right now?

The opening “Finally, brethren” signals this is the ‘beginning of the end’ of Paul’s letter, a collection of personal appeals and exhortations (chapter 3). These first five verses are tied together by Paul’s desire that he and his companions (1-2) and the Thessalonian believers (3-5) not be hindered by Satan either in ministry or spiritual growth.

Vss. 1-2 are two prayer requests for the apostles: First, that their gospel preaching would ‘spread rapidly’ (‘have legs;’ τρέχω – ‘make tracks;’ “to run”) and ‘be glorified’ (δοξάζω; magnified), by its visible life-changing power in the lives of those who hear it (1). This happened in Thessalonica, and Paul wants it to happen elsewhere. The second request is for protection from ‘perverse and evil men’ who do not ‘have faith’ (unbelievers). This is a fitting dual request for the Thessalonians: The gospel had had a phenomenal response in Thessalonica, and the persecution had also been severe. So Paul prays that the first response will be enhanced, and the second inhibited.

In verses 3-5, Paul first reminds the Thessalonian believers that God is faithful, and will strengthen and protect them from Satan (3). He encouragingly declares his confidence that they are adhering to the apostles’ commands, and will continue to do so (4; cf. 3.6). He ends with a prayer that the Lord will ‘direct (κατευθύνω has the sense of ‘making a straight path’ or ‘clearing away obstacles’; cf. BKC 2:723) their hearts into the love of God and the steadfastness (ὑπομονή; endurance, or the ability to endure) of Christ.’ The NLT captures the essence here as good as any translation: May the Lord lead your hearts into a full understanding and expression of the love of God and the patient endurance that comes from Christ (5).

Outline:

1. Prayer for Power and Protection in Gospel Preaching (1-2)
 - a. Prayer that the gospel will ‘have legs’ in reaching the lost (1)
 - b. Prayer that godless leaders will not hinder the gospel (2)
2. Confidence in God’s Faithfulness in New Believers’ Lives (3-5)
 - a. God strengthens and protects believers from Satan (3)
 - b. Expression of confidence they will obey commands (4)
 - c. Prayer for godly love and Christ-like endurance (5)