



MUTUAL PRAYER FOR DIFFICULT TIMES 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

In this brief letter to the young church at Thessalonica, Paul teaches about the last days or end times. There was confusion about the second coming of Christ. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul discusses the coming of the Lord to rapture the saints. In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Paul discusses the Day of the Lord that will consummate history. But confusion apparently remained. So Paul wrote this second letter to the church. In chapter 1, Paul again discusses the coming of the Lord. In chapter 2, Paul discusses the man of lawlessness who will oppose Christ. In chapter 3, Paul exhorts the church to live in light of the imminent return of Christ.

This is the pattern when the Second Coming is addressed. There is explanation and then exhortation. The New Testament is emphatic that Jesus is coming again. The Lord will return to the earth physically and majestically and unexpectedly. But Christ's imminent return is not an excuse to disconnect from the real world or live irresponsibly. We are to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, looking for that blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This letter begins with the reality of the last days. It ends with the responsibility of the saints as we live in the last days. Between these two sections there is the resource the church can access until Jesus returns. It is the privilege and power of prayer. Paul was facing difficulties in Corinth. And the saints were facing difficulties in Thessalonica. But Paul knew a way they could help one another through their difficult times. He says, "You pray for me. And I will pray for you." There is a dynamic power that works when pastor and people pray for one another, when the saints pray for one another. But it can only be accessed when our focus is on the Lord. Paul and the Thessalonians prayed for one another. But the primary concern of their mutual prayers was not themselves. It was about the Lord, who is mentioned four times in these five verses. 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5 teaches three spiritual priorities that should consume our prayers for one another.

I. THE WORD OF THE LORD

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 says: "*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.*" Chapter 2 of this letter ends with Paul's prayer for the church at Thessalonica. Chapter 3 begins with a prayer request Paul makes to the church. Verse 1 says, "*Finally, brothers, pray for us.*" This request is not unique. Paul frequently solicited the prayers of the saints. 1 Thessalonians 5:25 also reads: "*Brothers, pray for us.*" Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles. The Thessalonians were brand new Christians. Yet Paul did not think they were too little to pray for him. And he did not think he was too big to ask for their prayers. Paul humbly requested, "*Brothers, pray for us.*" This

request is in a grammatical emphasis that denotes continual action. He solicited their ongoing prayers. Paul's example reminds us that we never reach a place where we do not need others to pray for us.

This prayer request also tells us that the Thessalonians needed to pray. The saints at Thessalonica were facing difficulties for which Paul prayed the Lord would comfort and establish them. But Paul did not consider the difficulties these young Christians faced so great that he should not ask them to pray for him. They needed to pray as much as they needed to be prayed for. This is the irony of prayer. The heavy load you carry is often lifted as you take on the burdens of others. Job 42:10a says, "*And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends.*" Job's friends were not good friends. As he suffered, they showed up to question and condemn him, rather than comforting him. Yet he prayed for them. And God intervened for Job when he prayed for his friends. God will also restore some things for you when you pray for your friends. Paul understood the benefits of mutual prayer. So he asked the saints to pray for him and his missionary team. Specifically, Paul makes two prayer requests concerning the word of the Lord.

A. PRAY FOR THE OPPORTUNITY THAT IS BEFORE US.

Verse 1 says, "*Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you.*" This request was not so much for Paul and Silvanus and Timothy as it was for the word of the Lord. It is an affirmation of the primacy of the word of God. No one in the church is indispensable. But the word of God is. All that the church is and does is to be rooted and grounded in the word of God. WARREN WIERSBE comments: "Too much Christian work these days is accomplished by human plans and promotion, and not by the word of God. We trust our programs and do not publish the word of God." May this not be true of us. May the Lord give us a holy passion and preoccupation with the word of God. May we preach it, teach it, believe it, obey it, share it, defend it, and pass it on to the next generation. This requires prayer. Pray and the word of God are inextricably tied together. Both must be alive and well for the church to be healthy. So Paul asks the church to pray for the ministry of the word.

PRAY THAT THE WORD WILL GET OUT. Paul asked the saints to pray "*that the word of the Lord may speed ahead.*" The verb Paul uses here means "to run." It is an athletic term used of one who runs a race. Paul pictures the word as a strong runner speeding ahead on its course. This prayer request makes an important statement about the nature of the word. The word of God is not dead or idle or passive. It is alive and active and on the move. Psalm 147:15 says, "*He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.*" This prayer request is also a statement about the urgency we ought to have for the progress of the word of God. If we believe the word of God, we should pray earnestly that the word would speed ahead to reach those who are lost.

PRAY THAT THE WORD WILL GET IN. The word can get out without getting in. It can reach a person's ears without reaching his or her heart. So Paul asked the saints to

pray, *“that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored.”* The word can be translated “honored” or “praised” or “glorified.” Psalm 138:2 says, *“I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.”* God exalts his word as much as his name. And it is God’s will that his word be exalted among men. So pray the word of God would be honored in our city and state and nation and among the nations. The word of God is honored when it is affirmed and believed and obeyed. At the end of verse 1, Paul gives us a frame of reference: *“as happened among you.”* When Paul preached the gospel in Thessalonica, they honored it. In 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul writes: *“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”* Paul asked the church to pray that what happened among them would happen in Corinth: that the word of God would speed ahead and be honored.

B. PRAY FOR THE OPPOSITION THAT IS AGAINST US.

In verse 1, Paul testifies about the positive response the word of God received in Thessalonica. But in verse 2, Paul testifies about the negative response the word received in Corinth. In verse 1, Paul asked the saints to pray for the proclamation of the message. But in verse 2, he will ask them to pray for the protection of the messenger. In verse 1, we see Paul’s humility. But in verse 2, we see his humanity as he asks the saints to pray, *“that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men.”* Paul was doing the will and work of the Lord. Yet he still faced opposition he described as *“wicked and evil men.”* “Wicked” refers to stubborn, unreasonable men who oppose the word. One commentator called them “morally insane.” Paul also calls them *“evil men,”* indicating they were actively involved in mischief to hinder the word.

This is as specific as Paul gets about his opposition. But we know from the record of Paul’s time in Corinth that he is referring to religious people both outside and within the church who opposed his work. Concerning this text, J. VERNON MCGEE wrote: “I find that the spreading of the Gospel is hindered more by people in the church than by anything else. No liquor industry, no barroom, no gangster ring has ever attacked me – at least I have never known about it. But I have had so-called saints in the churches attack me.” Paul could surely relate. Yet he does not spend a lot of time talking about the opposition. He mentions them only to make a prayer request: *“that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men.”* The word “deliver” is the same word used in Matthew 6:13, where Jesus teaches us to pray, *“Deliver us from evil.”* Why does Paul ask for the saints to pray for deliverance? *“For not all have faith.”* Paul did not take personal attacks personally. He rather viewed it as a spiritual matter of faith. So he asked the church to pray for his deliverance for the sake of the word of the Lord.

II. THE FAITHFULNESS OF THE LORD

Verse 2 ends with a sad indictment: *“For not all have faith.”* Verse 3 begins with a wonderful assurance: *“But the Lord is faithful.”* We live in a world where loyalty is a scarce commodity. And we are often left to ask, who can you trust? Paul answers, *“The Lord is faithful.”* His character never changes. His love never ceases. His compassion never ends. His promises never fail. His wisdom never errs. His purposes never come short. His strength never wanes. T.W. SMITH wrote: “No matter the state of the restless sea of humanity, be it the muted ebb and flow of indifference, or the violent swell of fierce opposition, the Lord controls the waves, and he is faithful in every circumstance.”

He is faithful in salvation. 1 Corinthians 1:9 says, *“God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ the Lord.”* He is faithful in temptation. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, *“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”* God is faithful in confession. 1 John 1:9 says, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* God is faithful in sanctification. 1 Thessalonians 5:24 says, *“He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”* He is faithful in every circumstance. Lamentations 3:22-23 says, *“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”* In verses 3-4, Paul states the Lord can be trusted to do what needs to be done in you and through you.

A. THE LORD CAN BE TRUSTED TO DO WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE FOR YOU.

Verse 3b says, *“He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.”* There are two promises here. There is the promise of internal stability. Verse 3 says, *“He will establish you.”* The verb *“establish”* means to confirm, settle, or support.” In 2 Thessalonians 2:17, Paul prays the Lord would *“comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.”* That prayer request is a bold promise here. Paul declares the Lord is faithful to make you strong and stable and settled on the inside. When I got my first car, I did not know anything about cars except that you have to make sure there is gas in it. At some point, a light showed up on the dashboard that said **“Check Engine.”** But every time I started the car up, it worked. So I did not pay it any attention, until the car stopped on my way to preach one Friday night on the 405 Freeway during rush hour in the rain. Things like fear and anxiety and anger and frustration and irritability are the “Check Engine” lights of the heart that you ignore to your peril. But Isaiah 26:3 says, *“You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.”*

Likewise, there is the promise of external security. Verse 3 says, *“He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.”* In verse 2, Paul asks the saints to pray for his deliverance from wicked and evil men. Now in verse 3 he promises the saints the Lord will guard them from the source of evil – the evil one. The suggestion

is that when men work to hinder the progress of the word, it is not an issue of mere interpersonal conflict or personal opinion or human wisdom. It is spiritual warfare. Ephesians 6:12 says, *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”* People are never your biggest problem. The enemy of our souls is at work to undermine the word and overthrow our faith. But the Lord is faithful to guard you against the evil one. The word *“guard”* is a military term used of a soldier who stands guard to protect against enemy attack. Satan and his forces are in the invisible realm plotting against the truth and the gospel and the saints and the church and the kingdom. But the Lord stands guard to protect us from the evil one. Jude 24-25 says, *“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”*

B. THE LORD CAN BE TRUSTED TO DO WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE THROUGH YOU.

Verse 4 is a word of commendation: *“And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things we command.”* Paul is speaking as a pastor here. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul issued commands for the saints to live by. Now he commends them for their obedience to these commands. And he was confident they would continue to obey in the days to come. This commendation is an affirmation that believers in Thessalonica were true Christians. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus gives the mission of the church: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”* True discipleship is characterized by a life of obedience. In Luke 6:46, Jesus asks, *“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?”*

Paul commends the saints for their obedience to the word. But his confidence was not in the Thessalonians. Verse 4 says, *“And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things we command.”* Paul’s confidence was in the Lord, not the Thessalonians. Feel the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. It is our Christian duty to obey what scripture commands. And we will be held accountable at the judgment seat of Christ for our disobedience. Yet we cannot take credit for any good thing we do. We should not get upset when people do not recognize what we have done. And we should not become puffed up by the praise of others. In all we have done, we have not done anything at all. Christ did it all. Philippians 2:12-13 says: *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”*

III. THE DIRECTION OF THE LORD

In verses 1-2, Paul makes a prayer requests for the word of the Lord. In verses 3-4, Paul exhorts the saints to trust and obey with confidence in the faithfulness of the Lord. Now in verse 5, Paul announces a benediction in which he entrusts the saints to the direction of the Lord: *“May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.”* This prayer requests falls into three parts.

A. THE PRIORITY OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION.

In verse 5, Paul says, *“May the Lord direct your hearts.”* The saints at Thessalonica faced various challenges. But Paul did not pray about their circumstances. He did not do it in the prayer report recorded 1 Thessalonians 1:11-12. He did not do it in the prayer recorded in 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17. And he does not do it here. Instead, Paul prayed for their *“hearts.”* The *“heart”* is the seat of personhood – the mind, the will, and the emotions. It is who you are underneath the skin. When things are not going right in our lives or in the church, the heart of the matter is usually the matter of the heart. Proverbs 4:23 wisely counsels, *“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”* Everything in life flows from the condition of your heart. So what is happening in you is more important than what is happening to you. Your spiritual disposition is more important than your surrounding circumstances. So Paul prays that God would work on their hearts. And this should be the priority of our prayers for one another.

B. THE PETITION FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Verse 5 says, *“May the Lord direct your hearts.”* The verb *“direct”* means *“to open a path”* or *“to clear away the obstacles.”* God is able to do both. God is able to lead you in the way you should go. And God is able to move obstacles and opposition out of your way. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”*

C. THE PURPOSE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Verse 5 says, *“May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.”* Paul asks the Lord to direct their hearts to two destinations. He does not ask for the saints to be directed to victory over enemies or provision for needs or healing for hurts or solution for problems or cessation of trouble. He prays the Lord would direct their hearts to the love of God and steadfastness of Christ.

MAY THE LORD DIRECT YOU TO THE LOVE OF GOD. The phrase *“the love of God”* can refer to either the saint’s love for God or God’s love for the saints. Either way works. But in light of the context, it probably refers to the love of God for the saints. Paul

prays that the Lord would lead the saints into a great assurance of God's love for them. God is love. And anything that has to do with God has to do with love.

- We call it mercy – it is God's forgiving love.
- We call it grace – it is God's undeserved love.
- We call it joy – it is God encouraging love.
- We call it suffering – it is God's perfecting love.
- We call it providence – it is God's caring love.
- We call it the will of God – it is God's unerring love.
- We call it the cross – it is God's proven love.
- We call it heaven – it is God's eternal love.
- We call it eternity – it is God's unending love.

Martin Luther said it well: "God does not love us because we are valuable, but we are valuable because God loves us." When life is filled with bad news, it is to this good news that we should run for refuge. Romans 8:35-39 says, *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

MAY THE LORD DIRECT YOU TO THE STEADFASTNESS OF CHRIST. This reference to *"the steadfastness of Christ"* can refer to the steadfastness Christ has or the steadfastness Christ gives. The word *"steadfastness"* translates a verb that means "to be under a heavy load." Yet you do not quit, even though the load is heavy. To the contrary, you keep pressing on in spite of the heavy load. Christ himself possessed and exhibited this steadfastness endurance or perseverance during his earthly life and ministry. And he enables those who trust in him to access his steadfastness for the burdens we have to carry. Hebrews 12:1-2 says, *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."*