

Enduring Trials in Light of Jesus' Return: Early Benediction

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

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*The Lord's Day Morning
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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, if you'll look with me at the last two verses in that chapter. You will notice immediately it's just one sentence; these two verses comprise one sentence and that sentence is a benediction. Some scholars of early Christianity call these "wish prayers" because they have their roots in similar prayers of blessing or expression of wishes, desires to God for blessing in someone's life. That has its roots in the Judaism of the time. You would find pious Jewish people praying these "wish prayers" for one another. And Paul is doing that for the Thessalonians.

Now benedictions are things that many people overlook. Sometimes when the benediction is being pronounced you're thinking about your pot roast and it simply signifies that the church service is over and you're about to get to go home. Some of you may be thinking about your pot roast before you get to the benediction but others of you really care about benedictions. I've had people that have given me ratings on my benedictions before because they are really in to benedictions and they care about them. Well Paul is going to give a benediction at the end of this letter as he usually does. If you flip over to chapter 3 and look at verse 18, you'll see that this letter ends with a benediction. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." And if you'll look at the beginning of the book — look at 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 verse 2. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." So there's a benediction there, a good word, a blessing, that Paul is pronouncing.

But here at the end of chapter 2 he provides for you a beautiful benediction. And it's appropriate because it comes at the end of a chapter that's been filled with many dangers, toils, and snares. This chapter is the chapter that speaks of the man of sin, the man of lawlessness, the great tribulations that are to come for believers. It's a fearful chapter in many ways. The Thessalonians have been asking questions that have frightened and disturbed them and Paul was giving them answers but some of the answers themselves could be fear generating. And he ends this chapter with a great word of blessing from God. As these

believers thought of living life and enduring trials in light of Jesus' return, he pronounces a blessing on them. He prays to God to bless them in a specific way and that's very helpful.

So I want you to be on the lookout for four things in this little two verse, one sentence, benediction. I want you to be on the lookout for what it tells you about God. What does it tell you about God, our heavenly Father? Secondly, I want you to be on the lookout for what it tells you about Jesus. Third, I want you to be on the lookout for what it says that God has already given you. And then fourth, I want you to pay close attention to the two things that Paul prays for God to bless you all with. So be on the lookout for those things: what it tells you about Jesus, what it tells you about God, what it tells you that you already have received from God, and what Paul asks God to give all of you. And let's pray before we read God's Word.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word. And even as we study a word of blessing, we ask that You would bless us with an understanding of this blessing that we might better appreciate who You are, what You have already done, and what You will do for us. Open our eyes then to behold wonderful things in Your Word and to receive this Word for what it is — the very Word of God and not merely the words of men. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear the Word of God. 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 beginning in verse 16:

“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.”

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

My great aunt Marjorie — we called her Auntie — my grandfather sister, who was the church treasurer at the Wieuca Road Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia for many years, would write me and my brothers on most of the significant occasions in our childhood — birthdays, Christmases, school graduations, and then even into later parts of life when significant things came along — and she would write letters, some of them long, in which she gave spiritual encouragement and then she told us what blessings she was praying to God for us to experience in life. Most of the toys I received in childhood are long forgotten; those letters I still have and I treasure them to this day. Some of them actually hang on walls in various offices and I look at them and I'm reminded of what my great Aunt Marjorie prayed for me. But those prayers, those letters, represented for her the deep aspirations of her heart for me and for my brothers, for my mother and my father and others to whom she wrote.

THE DIVINITY OF CHRIST

This prayer of blessing represents Paul's deep aspiration, his profound desire for your blessing from God. And so I want you to pay attention to every syllable that he has for you here because this whole blessing is a blessing to all who receive it by faith. And I want you to see four things as we look through it together today. The first is what it tells us about Jesus. And you see this in the opening words of verse 16, don't you? "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself." Now it'd be easy to skip over that phrase, wouldn't it? But I want you to revel in this for a moment and I want you to take it in. Realize that these words are being written less than twenty years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So what you are seeing in this verse reflects the settled belief of the very earliest Christians. And Paul is about to pronounce a blessing on the Thessalonians coming from God, but before he mentions God the Father he says, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself." Now just take that in. Paul was a Pharisee. He grew up in Bible-believing Judaism. He believed that there is one God and the very first commandment is, "You shall have no other gods before Me." And he still believes that — that there's only one God and you should have no other gods, you shouldn't worship any other gods, you should have no other gods before you; you should only serve the Lord your God. And here he is pronouncing a benediction in which he says, "May the Lord Jesus and God our Father bless you."

Now do you know what that does? It is a powerful testimony to the full divinity of Jesus Christ. Here is Paul — and notice here he doesn't just put Jesus and the Father in the same sentence as he often does. I mean take a look with me at 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. "To the church of the Thessalonians," verse 1, "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." So there he's grouping God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And then look at 2 Thessalonians chapter 1. "To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." And then look at the second verse, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." He not only groups God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ in the same sentence as he often does, he puts Jesus first! This is a powerful testimony to the full divinity of Jesus Christ. No godly, Jewish Pharisee would ever have put something before God who wasn't God! You see, Paul believed that there was one God who eternally existed in three persons — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — and he believed that the Father was not the Son and the Son was not the Father and the Father was not the Spirit and the Spirit was not the Father and the Son was not the Spirit and the Spirit was not the Father and the Son was not the Spirit and the Spirit was not the Son. So he believed that the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit were distinct but they were in the one God. And so he was ready to offer worship to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he will speak of the divinity of each without denying the unity of all. One God. Three Persons.

Now it took the Christian church three, four hundred years to figure out, "How do you say that in a few sentences?" In fact, I'd like you to take your hymnal out and

turn with me to page 846. Not hymn number 846; there isn't a hymn 846. Look at the bottom of the page and turn to page 846 and you will see on that page the Nicene Creed. Now the Nicene Creed was a creed that was composed to defend the Trinity and the deity of Christ in 325. It was slightly amended in 381 at the Council of Constantinople and then it was slightly amended and finally affirmed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. And this is the Nicene Creed that Christians have used East and West, North and South, for 1600 years now to confess their faith. And look at what it says about Jesus in the second part of that creed. "We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father."

Now every clause that I just read was designed by the members of the Councils of Nicea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon to affirm emphatically the deity of Christ and the oneness of God. There is one God who eternally exists in three Persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — and the Son, the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, is fully divine. But they didn't make up that doctrine. That doctrine goes all the way back to the earliest days of Christianity. And Paul is articulating it here. He wants you to receive a blessing from our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father. It's a powerful testimony to the deity of Christ. Listen to what John Stott says about this little phrase:

"Paul opens his prayer with these words: 'May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father.' Now we notice how once again here Paul couples the Father and the Son. He did it in 1 Thessalonians and he does it again. But he startles us here by putting the Son before the Father. It is amazing enough that within twenty years of the resurrection that Paul would have bracketed Jesus Christ with God. It is yet more amazing that now he brackets God with Jesus Christ. And goes on in spite of the plurality of the subject, Father and Son, to use the singular reflexive, "who," and the singular verbs, "loved" and "gave." Paul is quite clear in his prayer about the equality and unity of the Father and the Son."

And that's exactly right. Don't skip over that little phrase. That phrase is testifying to the deity, to the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that. When we come to worship on the Lord's Day we come to worship the divine Savior, the Son of the living God, begotten, not created. We come to worship Him as God. That's not a metaphor for us. He is not simply a great moral teacher. He's not merely a prophet. He is the Son of the living God. That is the essence, the uniqueness, of Christian worship — to worship Jesus as divine. And that's so important for us to remember. When we come to worship, we come to worship Jesus — fully God and fully man, in one person.

THE LOVING AND GIVING CHARACTER OF OUR HEAVENLY FATHER

Secondly, we learn something about our heavenly Father in this benediction. Not

only does it begin with a powerful testimony about the divinity of Christ, Paul gives us a testimony to the loving and giving character of our heavenly Father. Look at the phrase in verse 16 that comes right after the one we just read. “God our Father, who loved us and gave us.” Now let me — I won't even look at what He gave us for a moment; I just want you to concentrate on that phrase. “God our Father, who loved us and gave us.” What is Paul pointing to? He's pointing to two things in particular that he wants you to remember about God. God loves you and God gave something to you.

Now can you think of another verse that talks about God our Father loving and giving? John 3:16 — “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes on Him will not perish but have everlasting life.” Now this letter was probably written before John wrote his gospel, but John's theology of the heavenly Father and Paul's theology of the heavenly Father are exactly the same. They knew that our heavenly Father, sovereign as He is, mighty as He is, awesome as He is, is loving and giving. Now here, Paul is talking about “God our Father who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace” and we'll talk about that in just a moment, but recognize that He gave us eternal comfort and good hope by giving His Son. The only way we could have received eternal comfort and good hope, which we do not deserve because we rebelled against God in our sin, is by His Son being given in our place to receive what we deserve — punishment and condemnation — so that we could receive what He deserved — eternal comfort and good hope and blessing. So God loved us and gave His Son Jesus for us to die on the cross in order that, as we believe on Him, we may receive from God who loved and gave us eternal comfort and good hope. And Paul's just reminding you of this God.

Take your hymnals out again and turn back to 493. As we were singing Thomas Benson Pollock's hymn, it struck me that each verse begins with a confession and then each verse ends with a prayer to God to answer that confession. And one of the confessions was this. Look at verse 3, stanza 3: “We have not loved thee as we ought, nor cared that we are loved by thee.” Isn't that interesting? We haven't cared that we are loved by thee. And I identify with that. I know that God, in Christ, in the Gospel, has loved me, but there are some times when I don't live and act like I care that God loves me. I don't make as big a deal about that as I ought to. I don't experience that like I ought to. So look at what he has us pray at the end of the stanza. “Lord, give a pure and loving heart to feel and own the love thou art.” Now that's what I want you to do when you're listening to the words of this benediction which speak of God who loves you and who gave you eternal comfort and good hope. I want you to feel and own that love. And that is not an easy thing to do, for a thousand different reasons. You have to work at that. In relationships you know this. At the beginnings of a relationship it's easier to feel and own the love of another person. Live around a sinner long enough and it gets a little harder to do that. If you've walked with God for many years, you know in the first flush of your conversion when you first came to faith in Christ it was like you could have reached out and touched Jesus right there and then you get cold

to Him. And there's Thomas Benson Pollock giving us a prayer, "Lord, help me feel and own the love of God for me." That's a good prayer and I want you to remember that as you hear this benediction that speaks about how loving and giving your Father is.

And then I want you to think about this. Believers want to be like our heavenly Father. You know, one of the neat things to see when, especially little boys are growing up, is little boys hit a phase where they want to be like their dad. Now they grow out of it and dad becomes un-cool again, but there's a little phase where you can go into the bathroom and see a little boy up on a stool and what's he doing? He's shaving. He's like four and he's up there shaving. Why? Because he wants to be like dad. Or maybe you'll see a little boy who comes out and he dresses — or maybe his dad wears a uniform to work — and he comes out dressed in his dad's uniform and the sleeves are dragging along on the floor and the trousers are dragging along on the floor but he wants to dress like his dad. He wants to be like his dad. Well believers want to look like our heavenly Father. And guess what our heavenly Father was like? He was loving, He is loving and giving. And that means we're going to be loving and giving. So when you pass over those words of this benediction, don't miss them.

ETERNAL COMFORT AND GOOD HOPE THROUGH GRACE

There's a third thing I want you to see here though and it's what Paul says that we have already been given. It's still in verse 16; we haven't gotten out of verse 16 yet. We've already received from God a never ending encouragement and hope. What was it that God the Father gave us? "Eternal comfort and good hope through grace." Now don't miss any one of those three little phrases. He gave us eternal comfort, and here this means not just comforting you in a bad time; it's the Old English meaning of that term. He strengthened you. He encouraged you. He gave you eternal encouragement. Not encouragement that's going to fade away, but encouragement, strengthening, comfort that's always going to be there. Yesterday I was talking to a godly Christian woman who's about to say goodbye to her husband of sixty years. He's about to go home and be with the Lord. And she is strong in the Lord. She has been given eternal comfort. She doesn't want to part, but she's strong and she'll make it through because the Lord has encouraged her.

"The Lord has given you," Paul says to the Thessalonians and to you and me, "eternal comfort, comfort that's not going to go away, and good hope." Here's what William Hendrickson says about that good hope. "The good hope of which Paul speaks is a hope that is well founded, namely upon God's promises, Christ's redeeming work, and it is full of joy, it never ends in disappointment, and it has as its object the Triune God." And the Lord has given this to us how? Because we deserved it? No. Because we earned it? No. Because we worked for it? No. Because we added our works to our faith for it? No, He's given it to us through

grace. He's given us eternal comfort and a good hope through grace. You know, when you go through drive-thru restaurants around town, chances are as often as you will be told, "Have a good day," you will be told, "Have a blessed day." And when somebody tells you that the next time I want you to think this, "Do you realize that as Christians, you already have been blessed and you will be blessed?" You already have been blessed and you will be blessed. Paul still hasn't even gotten to the blessing prayer yet and what is he already doing, reminding you at the end of verse 16? He's reminding you that you are blessed. God's given you eternal comfort, comfort that nobody can take away from you, and He's given you good hope, hope that nobody can take away from you. You've already got it.

THE BLESSING

Now, fourthly and finally, Paul finally gets to the blessing. Having told you about Jesus, having told you about God your heavenly Father, having told you what you've already received, now he gives you the blessing. And it's two things that he wants all of you to have. He wants you to be encouraged and he wants you to be equipped. He wants you to be encouraged and he wants you to be equipped. Look at verse 17. "May our Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father," do what? "Comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word." Now look at the two sides of that blessing. He wants your hearts to be comforted. And again, that's that good strong Old English word, "strengthened." Some of your translations may even say, "encouraged." He wants you to be encouraged. Now he's just said He's already given you encouragement, but you can never get too much. And so he prays that God would encourage you. We need that encouragement for the living of the Christian life because we face hard things daily.

And then he says, "I want you to be established for every good work and word." The Christian life isn't just sitting around and contemplating the blessings that the Lord has given us. The Christian life is living out of the blessings that God has given us. Paul wants us to do and be what God made us to do and be. And so he says, "I want you to be encouraged but I want you to be equipped for every good work and word. I want every word and every work of yours to glorify God."

There was a wedding here last night and we were looking together at Colossians chapter 3 verses 12 to 17 and one of the things that that passage says is that we as Christians are to do everything in the name of Jesus Christ. And I got to thinking about that and I started thinking, "You know, it'd be hard to be mean to your wife in the name of Jesus Christ. It would be hard to be unreasonable with your husband in the name of Jesus Christ." You know, if you're doing everything in the name of Jesus Christ it cuts out a lot of things that you would do otherwise. And Paul here is saying, "I want you, in every word and every work, to glorify God. That's what you were made to do." And when you realize that, you think,

“Well Lord, I'm going to need some help on that.” Precisely. That's why he's pronouncing a benediction on you! “Lord, strengthen them, encourage them, comfort them, and then equip them, establish them, so that every word and every work glorifies You!” That is a blessing that Paul prayed not just for the Thessalonians, but under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for all of you.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word. Work it into our hearts. Grant that we would believe it and receive it, in Jesus' name, amen.

Now let's sing a hymn that thinks about these blessings that the Lord has given us even in trials. Number 689, “Be Still, My Soul.”

Receive God's blessing.

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, both now and forevermore. Amen.

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