

Enduring Trials in Light of Jesus' Return: Pauline Prayer Request

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

*The Lord's Day Morning
October 28, 2012*

A very appropriate hymn for this Lord's Day. Four hundred and ninety-five years ago on Wednesday, Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five points of debate on the church door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany, and sparked the Protestant Reformation. Five hundred million Christians in the world today trace their spiritual birth to the truths that were articulated by Luther and the other great magisterial reformers. We're just five years away from the five hundredth anniversary of that event.

Well, if you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to 2 Thessalonians chapter 3. We've gone to the final third of the book and you'll notice Paul begin this section with a "Finally," indicating that he has finished the main argument of the book. We've stated that over and over as, "Enduring Trials in Light of Jesus' Return," but he still has some exhortations and some encouragements to give to the congregation and he begins to enumerate them in the passage we're going to study together today.

As we read through this passage, I'd like you to be on the lookout for two or three things. In verses 1 and 2, you're going to see Paul make a prayer request and that prayer request will come in two parts. One part is at the end of verse 1; one part is in verse 2. That's the first thing I want you to be on the lookout for. Then, in the middle of this passage in verses 3 and 4, you will see Paul express his confidence. And again, there are two parts to this expression of his confidence. One, he says something about what God is doing that causes him to be confident in verse 3, and then he talks about what God is doing in the Thessalonians, and that causes him to be confident; and he mentions that in verse 4. Then the third thing I want you to be on the lookout for in this passage you'll find in verse 5, because after this prayer request in verses 1 and 2 and this statement of confidence in verses 3 and 4, Paul pronounces yet another benediction. We've already encountered benedictions in this book at the end of chapter 2. We're going to see another one at the end of chapter 3. Paul's letters are filled with benedictions, blessings that he prays or pronounces on the people of God. And guess what? This benediction has two parts. So be on the lookout for the two-

part prayer request, the two-part confidence, and the two-part benediction in this passage.

Before we read God's Word, let's pray and ask for His help and blessing.

Heavenly Father, this is Your Word. We do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from Your mouth. So we ask today that You would help us to see the truth which You have spoken in this Your Word, and that by Your Spirit You would apply that truth to our hearts in each and every situation of life in which we find ourselves this morning. Lord, Your words are always timely and always seasonable and Your words are timely and seasonable in ways that I have no idea how they will be timely and seasonable to Your people. But You know; You've known from before the foundation of the world exactly what every hearer of this passage needs. So speak to our hearts, O God, and get all the glory for Yourself, in Jesus' name, amen.

This is the Word of God. Hear it, beginning in 2 Thessalonians chapter 3 verse 1:

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.

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

Paul, in this letter, does what he does, for instance, in his little letter to the Philippians. He ends the formal teaching section and he introduces his conclusion with the word, "Finally," but he still has a chapter to go, and so that reminds you that Paul does what many preachers do. They say, "And in conclusion," and then they go on for a while! But Paul's doing this for a particular reason. It's almost like he's looked back over the letter that he's written so far, or perhaps dictated to his secretary, and he's realized that he still has some things that he wants to bless this congregation with. He wants to exhort them in some things and he wants to encourage them in some things. And isn't it interesting that after announcing, "Finally," — he's into the final section of the book — he begins with a prayer request. He asks the Thessalonians to pray for him. And one of the reasons he does this is Paul fully understands that the work of the Gospel ministry is ultimately God's work. And it doesn't matter how gifted he is, it doesn't matter how faithful he is; God's work is God's work and it requires God to prosper it. It requires God to make it successful. And so he begins by asking for them to pray for him. And I'd like to look with you for just a few moments at three things that we learn in this grand passage. In this passage we find a double

prayer request, a double confidence, and a double blessing. And I want to look at those two-fold prayer requests, confidences, and blessings with you today.

A DOUBLE PRAYER REQUEST

Let's begin in verses 1 and 2 with a double prayer request. Paul's words are, "Brothers, pray for us," but the language that he uses indicates that he's asking the Thessalonians to keep on praying. It's not like he's saying, "You haven't been praying and I'd like you to start praying." He's saying to them, "I know you're praying for us and I'd like you to continue to pray specifically for two things." The first thing you'll see there in verse 1, "that the Word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored." That's very interesting language and it's a great prayer request to pray for anybody that's in the Gospel ministry. And guess where it comes from? Paul's language comes right out of the Psalms. We've been studying the Psalms on Lord's Day Evenings. If you take your Bibles and turn back with me to Psalm 147 and look especially at verse 15, you're going to see exactly where Paul's language comes from here, "that the Word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored." Psalm 147:15, "He sends out His command to the earth; His Word runs swiftly." Do you hear Paul's pray request coming out of the passage? "Pray for us that the Word of the Lord may speed ahead...His Word runs swiftly."

And then turn further back in the Psalms. Turn all the way back to Psalm 19. Psalm 19 is the psalm where we're told that "the heavens declare the glory of God." The sun and the moon and the stars of the heavens declare God's glory. And in Psalm 19 verse 3 we're told that even though the sun and the moon and the stars don't speak to us, we don't hear their voice audibly in our ears, nevertheless, their voice, their line, has gone out. Look at verse 4 - all the way to the ends of the earth "and their words to the end of the world." Now when Paul says, "Pray that the Word of the Lord may speed ahead," he is thinking of the Word of the Lord traveling swiftly to the ends of the earth. It's a prayer for the spread of the Gospel and for the success of the Gospel. If you ever wonder, "How should I pray for campus ministers or evangelists or church planters or missionaries and for faithful Gospel preachers in other churches in our city, in our state, in our region, in our nation?" this would be a great prayer. Pray for the spread and the success of the Gospel. He's asking the Thessalonians to do this because Paul's faithfulness is not what brings that success. God's blessing is that brings the spread of the Gospel and the success of the Gospel.

So he says, "Thessalonians, I crave your continued prayers that the Word of God would spread, just like it spread to you, and that it would be honored, just like you honored it." Remember what he said back in 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 13? "I thank God that when you heard the Word of God, the message of your salvation, from us, you accepted it not as the words of men but as what it really is, the Word of God, which performs its work in you." He's praying that just as the Gospel came to them and was successful, that they will now turn around and be

concerned for the spread and success of the Gospel elsewhere. One of the ways that you know that the Gospel has taken hold in your heart is that you care about the Gospel taking hold of other people's hearts. If you don't care about the spread of the Gospel, if you don't care about other people coming to faith in Christ, if you don't care about the Gospel changing the hearts and lives of other people, it's very doubtful that your life has ever been changed by the Gospel because those who have been transformed by the grace of God, those who have realized the forgiveness of God, the undeserved, the glorious Christ-bought and wrought forgiveness of God, want everybody to experience that. So isn't it interesting? These people that Paul has come to as a missionary and shared the Gospel with and they've come to faith in Christ, he now asks them, "You get to work praying that others would come to faith in Christ." That ought to animate the prayer life of our congregation. This would be a great prayer, friends, on Wednesday night. Whether you're in your discipleship groups or gathered with us in prayer meeting, this would be a great prayer for us to be praying for our campus ministers, evangelists, church planters, missionaries, and ministers every Wednesday night we're together and of course when we're in our private prayer as well.

But that's not the only prayer request that Paul has. Look at verse 2; he's got another prayer request. He says, "Pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men." Now this is not theoretical for Paul. You know because you've read Galatians and you've read Romans and you've read some of Paul's later letters that Paul had people that dogged his steps everywhere he went in Asia Minor trying to undermine the teaching and the doctrines that he was proclaiming. There were people that contradicted the glorious Gospel of free grace that he was preaching place to place to place. This was not theoretical for Paul; these were real people. We call them the Judaizers and of course there were others that contradicted faithful teaching as well and they were trying to hinder Paul and they were trying to hinder his ministry. And Paul says to the Thessalonians, "Brethren, please pray for us. Pray that we would be delivered from evil and wicked men." Now isn't that an interesting thing? These are people that are trying to hinder the Gospel, and I am sure that in their own minds they were doing something that was good, but Paul calls them "wicked and evil men." And my friends, ministers of the Gospel in our own country, more and more, will need that prayer in our own day and age. Do you know that the hindrance of the Gospel is more legally possible in our land than it has ever been? And there's no sign of that sad tendency slowing down. So that there are places where you could read the Word of God without comment and you could find the Gospel and Gospel men hindered from doing the work of the Gospel simply because it was read in a place where it offended someone and the offended have decided that they don't want to hear those words in their ears. And so the Gospel itself is closed off, shut down, and forbidden in those settings. We need to pray for church planters and campus ministers and evangelists and missionaries and ministers because there are people who want to hinder the spread of the Gospel. These are two good petitions that we ought regularly to pray for ministers of the

Gospel. That's the first thing that I want you to see — Paul's double prayer request.

A DOUBLE CONFIDENCE

But here's the second thing. After asking for these two prayers to be lifted up for him and for his companions, Paul then says, "I want to tell you, I want to tell you that I'm very confident of what God is doing." He speaks of a double confidence. It's an assurance that Paul has in the Lord about what the Lord is doing *for* the Thessalonians and about what the Lord is doing *in* the Thessalonians. Look at what he says. "The Lord is faithful;" verse 3, "He will establish you and guard you against the evil one." Paul is saying that he is fully confident that the Lord will guard and strengthen the Thessalonians. And he says particularly that the Lord will protect them against the evil one. Now the language there is ambiguous. You could translate that "He will protect you against evil." It's just like the Lord's Prayer. Our King James Version of the Lord's Prayer says, in that great petition, "deliver us from evil," but it could be translated, "deliver us from the evil one." Here, Paul is certainly thinking of personal opposition to the Thessalonians, just like evil and wicked men were seeking to hinder them in their ministry, Paul is thinking of the evil one and how he wants to attack the Thessalonians.

I want to pause here and say Paul is very clear that there is a supernatural, personal force in this universe that wants to destroy you. He's just spoken in chapter 2 about the man of lawlessness and the man of sin, an instrument of the evil one against God's people. And Paul says here that he is confident that the Lord will deliver us from the evil one. Do we ever factor that in, in the struggles that we experience in life, whether it be marriage or family or vocation or whatever arena it may be, that the evil one is seeking to destroy His people? I'm not talking about blame shifting; I'm not talking about finding a demon under every rock, but I am talking about acknowledging the reality of a supernatural, personal force in this universe that wants to destroy us. This is not about blaming our sin or excusing our sin because of what the evil one has done.

Some of you are old enough to remember the comedian, Flip Wilson. One of his famous catch-lines was, "The devil made me do it," and it always drew a big laugh from the audience. That's not what Paul's talking about here, blaming our actions on the evil one. But Paul is talking about the fact, and it's stressed over and over in the New Testament, isn't it, that the evil one is like "a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour," or he is "crouching at our door" waiting to pounce upon us. This kind of language is used over and over in the New Testament. Do we realize it's not just our sin that we have to be on the lookout for? It's not just the opposition of the world, but it's the world, the flesh, and the devil, that are all arrayed against the Christian. By the way, Martin Luther sings about that in that hymn that he wrote, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." He sings about the world and the flesh and the devil in opposition against the Christian. But what Paul is

saying here is that he is confident that the Lord will establish and guard us. He will guard and strengthen us against the evil one. He is with us; He will not leave us or forsake us. He will protect us. And that is a tremendous truth that we so often forget right when we need to remember it.

Just this last week a fellow PCA minister that I actually taught when he was a student at RTS Jackson put this little post up on his Facebook wall. He said, "Sixteen times in the Bible God says, 'I am with you.' Twelve times in the Bible He says, 'I will not leave you.' Eight times He says, 'I will not forsake you.' So please, tell me, what's got you so worried?" It's a really good point. So often we forget God's promises that He is with us, that He will not leave us, and that He will not forsake us. And Paul's trying to remind us of that right here. He's saying, "The Lord will protect you and strengthen you; He will guard you and establish you. Don't forget that, Christian! Don't forget that!"

But that's not the only confidence Paul has here; there's another confidence. Here's the twin that he offers us as an expression of confidence. Look at verse 4. "We have confidence in the Lord about you that you are doing and will do the things that we command." Do you remember Jesus' marching orders to the disciples in Matthew 28:18-20? What were they supposed to do? They were supposed to teach the disciples to obey all the things that Jesus had commanded. Remember, that's their job in discipleship. It was not just to teach them the doctrine that Jesus had taught, but to teach them to obey everything that Jesus had commanded. And Paul is saying to the Thessalonians, "I have confidence that you are obeying the Word of God and that you will obey the Word of God." But notice what Paul says his confidence is in. "I have confidence in the Lord that you are and will do the things that we have commanded." In other words, Paul is saying, "This isn't just my confidence in you; it's my confidence in what the Lord is doing in you. I am confident that I can see the evidence of the Lord's work in your life, and not only is He for you, to guard you and protect you, to strengthen you and establish you, He is at work in you in order to grow you up in grace, in order to grow you in holiness, so that you grow in obedience."

Do you ever find yourself looking back and thinking about things that you struggled to do or not do, twenty years ago, that you're not have to struggle with anymore. Oh, I know there are things that we can look back twenty years ago that we were struggling with and we're still struggling with them today, I understand that, but have you ever found yourself thinking, "You know, I used to struggle with that and the struggle is not there anymore"? What is that due to? Is it due to you just being a wonderful person? No! It's the Lord's work in you. That's why you're not struggling with that anymore because over the years the Word of God, just like Craig was talking about, the Word of God, as you've gathered for worship, as you've opened the Scriptures daily, as you've gathered in a small group, as you've prayed with your friends, your spouse, your children, the Word of God has washed over you and washed over you and washed over you and it's changed you in that area. It's the Lord at work in you and Paul says, "I see those

evidences, Thessalonians. You may not be able to see them, but I see them. I see the evidence of the Lord at work in you.” And he speaks of this double confidence that he has.

A DOUBLE BLESSING

And then finally, he speaks a double blessing to them. And look at both parts of the blessing in verse 5. He says, “May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the endurance of Christ” or the steadfastness of Christ. Now look at each of these things. He says, “May the Lord direct your hearts,” first “to the love of God.” By this Paul means God's love for you. May the Lord direct your hearts to look at, to know, to contemplate, to understand, to experience, if I dare say it, to feel the love of God for you to know experientially that God loves you. I know many Christians that struggle to know that God loves them. They trust in Christ, they believe the Gospel, they believe every Word of the Bible, but they struggle for a whole variety of reasons with the experiential knowledge of the love of God. And when you're there, you go out to battle half beaten already. And here's the apostle Paul saying, “I'm praying that the Lord Himself, Jesus Christ, would direct you into a personal and experiential understanding of the love of God for you because it's so absolutely important for what we have to go through in the Christian life. So there's his first blessing. “May the Lord direct you into an understanding of God the Father's love for you.”

Secondly, this is so interesting — “May the Lord direct you” to what? “To the steadfastness of Christ” or “to the endurance of Christ.” In other words, Paul is saying that he wants you to look squarely at the endurance of Jesus Christ for you. He's calling you to endure in your trials and tribulations, but God, never in the Bible, asks us to do something that He is not prepared to do Himself. And when it comes to endurance in the Christian life, God is saying this to us, “My Son has already endured for you. Look to Him. When I call you to endure, I want you to look at Jesus' endurance for you. He endured depravation, poverty, suffering, pain, sorrow, rejection, mocking, torture, and death. He endured all of those things for you. So when I call you to endurance, I want you to be directed into the contemplation of the endurance of Christ for you.” So often we run into experiences in our lives and we're thinking, “I can't make it, Lord. I can't get through this. I'm not going to survive this.”

About a week ago, I ran across a notebook that I had not seen probably in twenty years. It dates from about twenty-five years ago in my life and I opened it up and it was a portion of a journal that I kept. Now I'm a terrible journaler. I journal for about three days and then I don't journal again for six months. And then I journal for two days and then I don't journal for four years. And then I forget that I had a journal and then I rediscover it again; so I'm a terrible journaler! But in this journal I was recording something that occurred about twenty-five years ago and reading my words, I thought that I was going through the worst thing that had ever

happened to me and that the world was about to come to an end. I would be embarrassed for you to read the words that I wrote in my journal! You would say, "This man is melodramatic" and you'd say a lot of worse things too! In fact, that page will be burned soon so you will not be able to see what I wrote in that journal! (laughter) But looking back on that journal, I had a conversation with my twenty-six year old self. And I was saying to my twenty-six year old self as I looked at that journal, "You have no idea! What you're going through now is nothing compared to the things that are ahead! This was a walk in the park, buddy! And you thought the world was coming to an end!" That's exactly why Paul says, "May the Lord direct you into the endurance of Christ" because there is nothing that the Lord is going to ask you to endure that Jesus has not already endured and more.

And so contemplating the endurance of Jesus is going to do what? It's going to put the huge things that you think you are facing into perspective. Jesus has not only already endured for you so that He is able to sympathize with you in the very real things that we have to endure, but it's also going to put what we have to endure into perspective, because what He endured was far, far greater than anything — thank God - that we will ever be called upon to endure as believers. And so Paul has a double prayer request, and a double confidence, and he pronounces a double blessing on you that you will be directed into the love of God your Father for you and into the endurance of Christ for you for your everlasting good. May God enable you to take it in. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word. Teach us to believe this blessing, especially — the love of God our Father for us, the endurance of Christ our Savior for us. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Now let's sing of that love of God which is so strong and true using number 81. We'll sing the first and the fourth stanzas.

Forever safe. Forever blessed. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the endurance of Christ. Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with

the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the [First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement](#).

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).