

## **Enduring Trials in Light of Jesus' Return: Double Benediction**

**2 Thessalonians 3:16-18**

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*The Lord's Day Morning  
November 18, 2012*

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to the second letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 3, and we're going to be looking at the final three verses of this letter. We've come to the end of our study of these two letters of Paul. You remember we said that 1 Thessalonians 1 was about living life in light of Jesus' return and we've said that one of the big themes of 2 Thessalonians is enduring trials in light of Jesus' return. And at the end of this letter, as Paul is speaking to a congregation that knew a lot about enduring trials, he is giving them a reason for their hope and a hope for their peace. He gives not just one but two benedictions in this short passage. And as we read it together this morning I'd like you to be on the lookout for three particular things.

If you look at verse 16 in the very first line you will see that Paul pronounces a blessing. He gives a prayer of blessing that pertains to peace. Then, if you look at the second sentence of verse 16, he speaks of the presence of Jesus' Christ. That's a second part of the blessing that he pronounces upon the Thessalonians. And finally, if you look down at verse 18, you'll see that he concludes just like he does the first letter to the Thessalonians with an emphasis on the grace of Christ. So peace, presence, and grace. Be on the lookout for those things as we read this passage together. Let's look to God in prayer now and ask for His help and blessing.

*Heavenly Father, You know what our hearts need and You know that we need the message of this passage just as surely as the Thessalonians did. We live in a different day and age, we live in a different time and place, we live in very different circumstances, but we need this message just as much as they did. Thank You for writing it down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thank You for preserving it pure in all ages so that the doctrine of Christ and of grace has come down to us sound and entire. Now enable us, O Lord, with hearing ears, to listen to this Word read and proclaimed and by Your Spirit, apply it to our own hearts in the specific ways that we need it. Grant us that we would believe it as we hear it, in Jesus' name, amen.*

Hear the Word of God in 2 Thessalonians 3, beginning in verse 16:

Now may the LORD of peace Himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with you all.

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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

You need comfort to live the Christian life because the Christian life is not trouble free. Yes, when we are saved very often we are profoundly aware of the blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus, we may be profoundly encouraged by the sense of being unburdened from our sins and being freely forgiven by the blood of the Savior, having to do nothing in order to come out from under the just condemnation of God, but knowing that Christ has borne that for us and we are free from condemnation. That may bring with it a fantastic sense of relief, of joy, of gratitude, and energy, and yet there are still troubles to face in the Christian life, there are still trials to go through in the Christian life, and so you need comfort to live the Christian life.

I was looking out this morning as you sang and looking at some of the faces of members of the congregation who've been so kind to let me know certain parts of your lives. And I was thinking, seeing some old friends who are here with us today, how happy this week is just to see them, for them to be with family members during Thanksgiving season, I was looking at some old friends who have gone through some very hard things in this last year, I was looking at some friends who the Lord has blessed this year but oh, there were years in times past where there were very difficult trials to walk through. You need comfort to live the Christian life. The doctrine that the choir was singing this morning, that "He who watches over Israel slumbers not nor sleeps," the doctrine of God's providence over His people, is one of those doctrines given to us in the Bible to comfort us. Or you think about what Jesus said to His disciples on the night that He was betrayed in John 14 to 16. You remember how He said to them, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me"? What was Jesus saying? He was saying, "Your comfort is going to come from what is true about God and from your believing what is true about God. And your comfort is going to come from what is true about Me and in your believing what is true about Me." And the Bible is filled with these things. Have you ever thought of it? It's filled with truth that is designed to comfort us in the living of the Christian life.

Well the passage that we're studying today is a passage that is filled with truth that is designed to comfort you in the living of the Christian life. And I'd like to look at three things that Paul says in this double blessing. I want you to see what

he says about peace in verse 16 in that first sentence, what he says about the presence of Christ in verse 16 in that second sentence, and then I'd like you to see what he says about grace in verse 18.

## **PRONOUNCING PEACE**

First, Paul says this. As he pronounces this benediction, as he prays what some scholars call a “wish prayer,” he says this. “Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times and in every way.” Now actually there's a three-point sermon just in that sentence. You know, you could focus on “the Lord of peace Himself,” then you could focus on “give you peace,” and then you could focus on “at all times and in every way” and there's your three-point sermon outline. Sunday school teachers, have at it! But what's Paul saying here? Paul is saying only the Lord of peace can give you real peace. Only the Lord of peace can give you real peace, and He is able to give it to you at all times, in all ways, in all places, and in all circumstances. Again, as I was looking out this morning, I thought as I looked at your faces of many of you who have faced, recently and in the past, circumstances that were anything but peace inducing. There was nothing about those circumstances that would have induced peace. So where are you going to get peace when you're in those circumstances? Not from the circumstances! And here's Paul saying to the Thessalonians, “May the Lord of peace Himself give you peace.” Isn't it kind of Paul?

You see, this congregation was facing trials and they were facing trials from the outside and from the inside. From the outside, they were facing pressure and even persecution and that persecution would increase. Some of these Christians who would receive Paul's letter would be martyred. That's a lot of pressure; that's a big trial. It's a big trial for the person who goes through it; it's a big trial for the person who loved those who are going through it. And so he says, “Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace, in all times, in all ways, in all places, in all circumstances,” because he knew they were going to go through trials. But he also knew that there were troubles within this congregation. Remember, one of the themes that we focused on especially in chapter 3 but we saw it all the way back in 1 Thessalonians was, there was a problem with — well, there's not a nice way of saying it — there were some fanatics in this congregation. There were some people who had decided that Jesus was coming back and he was coming back really, really soon and therefore they were going to quit work but you were going to feed them, while they looked down their noses spiritually at you for not being as spiritual as they were for quitting work.

Not long after my wife, Anne, was converted in college, she got to know a strong group of Christian folks in university and she was encouraged in fellowship with them and studied the Bible with them and went to church with them, but after a while, some of them decided that, “Well, Jesus was a carpenter, so maybe we should drop out of college and be a carpenter.” And my young Christian - I didn't

know Anne then, but now my wife - my young Christian now wife, Anne, looked at them and she thought, "You are nuts! I am signing up for foreign study and I'm getting as far away from you as I possibly can!" And that happens in a local congregation where you have people acting just a little bit on the edge. It doesn't foster unity; it actually fostered division. And this congregation had gotten divided within itself and so Paul says to them, "You need peace, not just because of what is happening on the outside. You need peace because of what's happening in this congregation."

Remember for Paul, unity is one of the signs that the Gospel is true. Paul loved the fact that Jews and Gentiles who, in that day and age, had very little to do with one another and very little to say nice about one another, would come together in one local congregation around the Messiah, Jesus, and they would be brothers and sisters. And Paul said, "You see, that unity shows that the Gospel is true." And so division was a big deal for Paul theologically, because division undermines not only your own comfort, it undermines your Gospel witness. And so Paul wants this congregation to be comforted. And so what does he say? "Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace, at all times and in every way."

And who's he talking about? If you look back in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, his benediction there says, "Now may the God of peace." Now that's how Paul usually refers to God the Father, but here he doesn't say that. He says, "The Lord of peace Himself." And usually when Paul uses that term, "Lord," he's talking about Jesus. And so he is saying, "May Jesus, who is the Lord of peace, give you the peace that only He can give." You think of it. In the Old Testament, the prophet in Isaiah 9:6 calls the Wonderful Counselor who is coming — what does he call him? The Prince of Peace! And here's Paul calling Jesus, "the Lord of peace, or as is said about Him later in the New Testament, "He Himself is our peace." And Paul says, "May that Lord of peace, who in His death on the cross, accomplish all that was necessary so that you could have peace, give you peace. And of course, peace doesn't just mean a cessation of warfare here. It means total well-being because you're no longer an enemy of God. You're no longer under just condemnation for your sin. You've not only been made a friend of God, you've been made a child of God by grace. You've been forgiven of your sins. There is no longer any condemnation in Christ Jesus. And so you're not longer estranged from God and you're no longer estranged from others in Christ. But Jew and Greek and slave and free and male and female are all one. Brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. And so our total well-being has been provided for in Jesus Christ.

That's why Horatio Spafford, when he'd lost his children, could still write, "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll. Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well, with my soul." Why? Not because of Horatio Spafford's circumstances, but because the Lord of peace Himself had given him peace. And that's what Paul is pronouncing on the

Thessalonians and you know what? We need it just as much as they did. We need that kind of peace because there are things that you're facing, right now today, that are anything but peace inducing. Where are you going to find comfort? Where are you going to find peace? By the peace that's given to you by the Lord of peace. That's the first thing that Paul says.

## **THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST**

The second thing that I want you to see is this, though. He speaks to us of the presence of Christ. Think about it this way. The peace of the Christian is only possible because of the presence of Christ, and the peace of the Christian is the presence of our Lord. The peace of the Christian is only possible because of the presence of Christ and the peace of the Christian is the presence of the Lord. Notice what Paul says here in verse 16. "The Lord be with you." Isn't that a beautiful blessing? "The Lord be with you." You can hear Jesus' words from John and from Matthew — "I am with you always." You can hear Jesus saying, "I will never leave you or forsake you." You can hear the Lord saying in Psalm 23, "Though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I am with you." Paul is pronouncing the blessing of the presence of Jesus with you and we need that.

As I was preparing for the wedding last night I came across a wonderful paragraph in which some words of the 20th century author, Frederick Buechner, were quoted. And I quoted a line or two of them. I want to share with you something larger from that paragraph this morning. He's talking about the blessings that the Lord gives His people and yet at the same time the trials that His people go through. And he says something like this. "Jesus says to you, 'Here is your life. You might never have been, but in my goodness, I brought you into existence and into this world. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen, but do not be afraid, I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. I am next to you. I am for you. I love you.'" Buechner's almost paraphrasing Romans 8, isn't he, with a little bit of John 14 to 16 thrown in? And that's what it is. What we need in the darkest places of life is to know that we're not alone in them but that the Lord is with us.

You know one of the saddest verses in all of the New Testament is found in 2 Timothy. Would you turn with me there? 2 Timothy 4 verse 16. I remember I was getting ready to preach on this passage, the larger passage in 2 Timothy 4, and I was talking with Sinclair Ferguson about the message before I preached it. And I was commenting about how deeply affected I had been by reading 2 Timothy 4:16 and he said to me, "You know, I have always thought that was one of the saddest verses in the Bible, and it was one of the wrongest things that has ever happened in Christian history." Paul tells us this. "At my first defense, no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me." That really is astonishing. Ever since Paul's arrest in Judea, his whole goal in the Christian life had been to be taken all the way to the high court in Rome, just a few blocks from the emperor's palace

and testify to the grace of Christ in the Gospel in the court of Caesar. And when the day finally comes for Paul to be able to give that testimony, do you know how many Christians were with him? None. No friends, no family, no fellow Christians, no fellow ministers. Paul was absolutely alone; but no he wasn't. What's the very next thing that Paul says in that verse? "But the Lord stood by me." Some of you in this room know what that is like. You know what it is to be left alone but for the Lord to stand beside you. And Paul's saying to the Thessalonians and he's saying to you, "Here's the blessing that I'm praying for you and I'm pronouncing on you — the Lord be with you."

## **NO PEACE WITHOUT THE GRACE OF GOD**

But he's not done. If you look down in verse 18 he has one more blessing. And apparently he writes this with his own hand. He takes the stylus from the hand of the amanuensis; he had been using someone to copy the letter. He had dictated the letter, apparently, and then someone with neat handwriting had been writing out the letter, but now Paul takes that stylus out and dips it in the ink and begins to write with his own hand. And you see what he says in verse 17. "I'm writing with my own hand so that you'll know that this letter is genuine. It really comes from Paul. This is how I write. You'll be able to notice my handwriting." And even as I read Paul's words I had flashbacks which had a combination of chills and comfort when I remembered the scrawl of my PhD supervisor. And sometimes when I saw his writing my stomach was in a knot, and sometimes when I saw his writing I was comforted, but it was a very unique style of writing. And anytime I received a note from David I knew who it was from because nobody wrote like David Wright!

Well here's Paul saying, "This is how I write." And then apparently in his own hand he scrawls out the words, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." How appropriate. Paul had no doubt pronounced that benediction on them verbally; no doubt they had heard that many times from Paul's lips. Now they're reading it in Paul's own handwriting. Wouldn't you love to see it in Paul's handwriting? Wouldn't you love to see Paul write those words in his own hand? But God has preserved his words and Paul, even as he's pronouncing it on the Thessalonians, he's pronouncing it on you. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." What's Paul saying there? He's saying this. "There can be no peace without God's grace. There can be no peace without God's grace. Just as there can be no peace, no real peace unless it's given by the Lord of peace, and just as the presence of the Lord of peace is the Christian's peace, there can be no peace apart from God's grace."

Now let's be very clear. What do we mean by grace? Grace is a beautiful word and we love to say it and it's often on our lips but what do we mean by grace? I mean this. Grace is God's forgiving favor. He forgives you as favor, as gift. Not because you deserve it, not because you have earned it, but He forgives you

freely. That's grace. But we could say more. Grace is God's forgiving favor poured out on us, though we are undeserving, in the extravagantly expensive gift of His Son, His own Son, who died in our place that we might be forgiven, freed, and finally alive. Now what do we mean by that? By God's grace, through the work of His Son on the cross, we are forgiven. God does not punish us as we deserve to be punished because Jesus has received our condemnation in our place and we are forgiven and we're free. We're finally set free from the bondage of sin to be who God made us to be in the first place. When God created us He made us to be His very image. And in His grace, through Jesus Christ, He sets us free. So for the first time, we take this deep draft in our nostrils and we feel the air of freedom for which we were created. We are finally able to be who God made us to be and we're alive.

The world has told us, "If you want to be alive, you have to do what you want to do. You have to put yourself first. You have to put self number one. You have to do what you want to do. Forget what God wants you to do; forget what others want you to do. Do what you want to do. That's real life." And of course Satan's been giving that line for thousands of years and it never works. And it ends up being bondage. But now, through the grace of God, we're finally alive. The irony is, you get to be finally alive by dying first. You die to yourself, you see your sin, you know what you deserve, you die with Christ, and then you're raised to newness of life with Him and you're finally alive. And it all happens because of God's grace. And Paul's saying all of that grace, all of that grace is through Jesus Christ, so the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

But don't miss the "alls" of this passage. Have you noticed how many "alls" there are in this passage? Look back at verse 16. "Give you peace at *all* times and in *all* places." Look again at verse 16. "The Lord be with you *all*." Look at verse 18. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you *all*." This is the apostle Paul's doctrine of "no Christian left behind." He knows there are some folks that are on the edge in that congregation but he wants them all to know this peace and he wants them all to know Christ's presence and he wants them all to receive Christ's grace. And I want you all to know those things. And the only way you can know those things is by faith. You know, to be comforted in this life you need a peace that only God can give. But here's the irony. There are a lot of us who know about that peace but who don't experience it. And have you ever asked yourself, "Why? How is it that a person could know the peace that God promises in the Bible and not experience it?" It's because to experience that peace you must have faith. You have to receive the promise of peace by the response of faith. You have to believe. And you see, even believing in that promise of peace is a gift. So it's my prayer that all of you will receive the gift of peace by receiving the gift of believing in the promise of peace that God has pronounced upon you.

Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, by the work of Your Spirit, it is my ardent desire that You would*

*open up the hearts of this people and You would give them the gift of faith to believe on Christ so that they might receive the promise of peace from the One who swears by His own blood that He will never leave them or forsake them and who has told them that though in this world they have tribulation, that in Him they may have peace. I ask this in Jesus' name, amen.*

Now let's sing ourselves into belief using number 691, "It Is Well With My Soul."

Receive now God's benediction.

Now may the Lord of peace Himself, give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with you all. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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