
Praying for Comfort & Stability

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

Devon Berry

Introduction

Tonight we continue our series on *Prayers of the Apostles*. In studying these prayers it is our objective to: 1) Explain how the NT Saints prayed as it is recorded in Scripture; 2) encourage a careful examination of our own praying; 3) exhort Christians to real, Biblical praying; and 4) expect personal transformation in our praying.

Our study this evening will be focused on 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17. Let's begin with verse 13 of chapter 2 and read together through the end of the chapter [READ PASSAGE].

As I was preparing for speaking this evening, I wanted to somehow illustrate, at least in a small way, the context of our text in a way that would perhaps bring the understanding of it a little closer to home. So as I got to thinking, I was reminded of our time in Seattle, where Beth and I were introduced to the wide world of public transportation. There were certainly a lot of people who commuted on foot and by bike, but not nearly as many as took the bus. And riding the bus was a multi-faceted experience.

One of the most important feature of the bus riding life was *waiting* for the bus. Usually one of four scenarios would play out:

1. You think the bus is about to arrive any second – you hustle, you run, you sweat, you drop your precious cup of Starbucks, you J-walk – but it doesn't matter! You are not going to miss the bus!
2. You arrive at the stop on time and the bus seems to be late – or worse – it doesn't look like its going to show at all. Everyone moans, groans, curses, some just start walking, others slip into a stupor of disbelief, cell phones start lighting up, the three coffee shops in immediate proximity to the coffee shop fill up, etc.
3. You arrive at the bus stop 30 seconds late. The bus is pulling away. You beat on the side of it to signal the driver that you're there, "...sorry buddy" the other riders hear the driver comment as he pulls away.
4. OR, in the very rare case, the bus arrives on time, you board on time, and everything goes like clockwork.

With each scenario, excluding the last, there is a mismatch between what you believed was going to happen and what actually did happen. This mismatch between belief and actuality could generate a wide range of emotional responses at the bus stop! Ranging in variety from rage to anger to despair to defeatedness, to confusion, to anxiety, to fear, and so on..

So why share about my and Beth's bussing experiences in Seattle? Because in some small and less serious way this experience was not dissimilar from where the Thessalonians found themselves in the text we are considering this evening. Depending on which commentator you read, the Thessalonians thought that they had either missed the bus for a VERY important appointment OR the arrival of the bus was imminent and they had dropped everything to make sure they were at the stop when it arrived (they had misread the signs at the bus stop).

What we're talking about here, of course, is Christ's return. The Thessalonians, as we will see, were alarmed! They believed that the Day of the Lord was unfolding before their eyes and they were gripped by fear and anxiety unable to understand how to interpret what was going on around them. The context we find ourselves in is perhaps somewhat different in circumstance to the Thessalonian, but similar in essence. As modern day Western believers, we are probably more like those who have given up on the bus – we truly do not believe that it is coming anytime soon, if ever...therefore, we've wandered off into the coffee shop next door hoping that the caffeine will alleviate our latent fears and anxieties, or even our growing indifference to what the future will hold. In essence, we are very similar to the Thessalonians – we have wrong beliefs, or are gripped by our unbelief, and therefore respond and react in ways not pleasing to the Lord.

Tonight we want to consider vv. 13-17 in 2 Thessalonians as they set forth how it is we might pray for those who have eschatological anxieties or mis-beliefs about Christ's return. In short, we want to consider how it is Paul prayed for a people who were working to be actively waiting and ready for Christ's return. Before we get started, lets pray. [PRAY]

The Thessalonian Context

Let's begin by considering at some length the context of the Thessalonian church.

An exemplary church

The Thessalonian church was composed of Greeks, Jews, and prominent women in the city (Acts 17). We know from both 1 and 2 Thessalonians that this was a church that Paul regarded highly as being exemplary for other early NT churches: Consider with me 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10 [READ] and 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4 [READ]. Although the Thessalonians were not perfect, they were clearly living out their Christian lives within their community in a manner that was worthy of note and replication. They were not dead-beats. They were actively pursuing life as a body that recognized Christ as its head.

A suffering church

We can see that the Thessalonian church was presently experiencing persecution [READ 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15; 2 Thessalonians 5-7a] In fact, the church in Thessalonica was born in adversity. From the time of Paul's first preaching and teaching in the city of Thessalonica (Acts 17) there was persecution of those who had converted. This affliction had apparently continued from the beginning of the church up through the writing of 2 Thessalonians, a period of about 2-3 years. It seems clear from both Paul's 1st and 2nd letters that the persecution was more of a hands-on affair versus simple name calling or being marginalized. From the point of Jason (a host of Paul & Co. in Thessalonica during

2nd missionary journey) being accused of harboring those who were trying to lead a revolt and being drug from his home and brought before city officials *to* Paul's comparison of the Thessalonian's suffering in his first letter to the church's in Judea who's countrymen had "killed both the Lord Jesus and prophets, and drove us [Paul and coworkers] out and displease God..." (1 Thessalonians 2:15) – we can reasonably assume that there was much suffering and persecution. Although we are not focusing on this tonight – I cannot help but again set forth this question: If we as a local body had endured three years of very real and physical persecution – would we still be together? Would we be describe as a imitators of the Lord, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, an example to other churches, our faith growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of us for another increasing?

A presently confused and concerned church

And now we come to the immediate context from which Paul's prayer for the Thessalonian church flows. In 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians Paul has discussed at length those events and circumstances that will occur and characterize the period around Christ's return. Paul has obviously written about these things *because* the Thessalonians are *concerned* and have questions about them. In 1 Thessalonians we see Paul teaching about what will happen to those believers who have already died (4:13-18), and the 'day of the Lord' or Christ's return (5:1-11). In 2 Thessalonians, Paul continues to respond to questions about the day of the Lord in chapter 2, giving further explanation of what must happen prior to this event, as well as the role of Satan, the lawless one (antichrist), and unbelievers during this time. It is clear that these questions, at least as far as this topic goes, are not new among the Thessalonians. We can conclude from 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 and 2 Thessalonians 2:5 that at least Paul, and quite possibly Timothy (1 Thessalonians 3:6), after Paul's initial stop and establishing of the church on his second missionary journey, had spoken directly with the Thessalonians on these matters.

It would seem that the Thessalonians, by the time of the writing of 2 Thessalonians, had never completely resolved these issues in their own hearts and minds. In fact, they had been led to believe (easily led astray, perhaps) by a letter they received from someone pretending to be Paul, that the Christ had already come or was about to come (commentators differ) (2:2b) They seemed to think that there own suffering was indicative of having been left behind or the events leading up to Christ's return. There may also have been those among them who were reinforcing this idea by spoken word (2:2a). The Thessalonians were "shaken in mind," "alarmed," (2:2a) losing "hope" (2:16), wavering (2:15) and anxious or comfortless (2:17).

So the picture we have here is that of a church which is enduring much difficulty and suffering at the hands of their countrymen and neighbors. They have struggled to come to a correct understanding of the day of the Lord and have now been misled to believe that their suffering is indicative that Christ has already returned and left them behind, or who's return is imminent, and they are now suffering in the terrible events which Paul speaks of in chapter 2.

Paul responds to these fellow believers in two ways: (1) He gives factual doctrinal information to correct the error in their belief (2:1-12); and (2) He comforts, exhorts, and

prays for them by speaking truth tailored to meet the Thessalonian believers right where they were at – he indirectly, directly, and gently addresses their heart issues of fear, anxiety, disbelief in the veracity of God’s promises, and quickness to abandon the apostles’ teaching in both practice and belief.

It is both informative and instructive for those of us who are elders to observe Paul’s careful watch care over the Thessalonians. Although he has already addressed the Thessalonians about these issues [perhaps repeatedly], he again clarifies and patiently sets forth the information needed to correct the error in their doctrinal beliefs. He meets them at their point of need in their distress – wisely discerning the causes and cures of the given situation. He then goes on to speak to their hearts and to reassure and encourage their faith while exhorting them, “stand firm!” It is clear throughout both of the Thessalonian letters that Paul loves those he is leading. He takes his responsibility to watch out for them and care for them very seriously. He is patient. He is gentle. He encourages them by recognizing them for their obedience to the truth and the love they have for one another. He answers questions and does not tell the people to “just do what I say, and stop asking questions!” At the same time, Paul also exhorts and admonishes, speaking firmly where needed, such as in chapter 3, and this to a church to which he has given many accolades. These are the same qualities that should be associated with the elders as we go about our work of serving and leading this body.

Now that we have take some time to understand the context of the Thessalonians, what can be learned about how it is we might pray given similar concerns and issues?

Prayers for People with Eschatological Anxieties, Mis-beliefs, and Unbelief

Is there any connection between us and the Thessalonians? I believe so. Do we secretly live in disbelief - believing that Christ will never come? Just as the Thessalonians mis-believed that he had already come or was about to come? Although most of us would immediately answer “no” to that question, a better question is, do we *live* as if we believe that Christ is truly returning one day? There is at least one strong commonality that connects us to the Thessalonians as we think about Paul’s prayer and statements in verses 13-17: We, like the Thessalonians, suffer from unbelief, or mis-beliefs about Christ’s return. To put this back into the bus metaphor, we begin wandering around at the stop...we check out this storefront, we check out that storefront...we begin staring at our feet...our mind wanders...our gaze is no longer directed down the road toward the bus, but elsewhere, we slowly become indifferent. We might get angry, despondent, anxious, distrustful, cynical, even listless and disaffected. We stop doing what we are supposed to be doing, living out the Christian life while faithfully watching for the bus. In these next few verses Paul seeks to console (in light of the rebellion and apostasy just discussed) and exhort the Thessalonians to living in belief of God’s promises in what is a linear historical timeline/reality.

Give thanks to God for His sovereignty in redemption (v.13-14)

In Paul’s first statements to the Thessalonians (v.13), after correcting the error in what they believe about the day of the Lord, he cuts to the heart of one of the main problems the Thessalonians were experiencing – they did not understand and believe God’s prom-

ises. They did not fully trust in the Lord's promise to save them, although Paul had on several different occasions taken up these matters with them. If they had, why would there be such distress and anxiety among them? Why the need for Paul to repeat himself? Why the quickness to abandon the Truth when receiving a letter contrary to what they had already been taught? Some commentators suggest that some Thessalonians had actually stopped working because of their wrong beliefs about the day of the Lord, assuming all was lost or all was about to end – so why keep working so hard? It is clear that the Thessalonians' unbelief had shook them and caused them great anxiety. Paul addresses this by reminding them, declaring to them, God's sovereignty in redemption meeting head on this alarmist mentality that they had been gripped by. In one sense Paul simply says to them – you are acting like fatherless children. Stop. Listen. Remember. These are the true Truths that cannot be undone...

Paul opens his consolation in v.13 with what may have been the sweetest word in this letter for the Thessalonians, "But..." In stark contrast to those described in verses 10-12, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they are "beloved by the Lord" (v.13) unlike the wicked who are perishing (v.10). And it is this love, which chooses and elects, that makes all the difference for the Thessalonians. They are not of those who have "pleasure in unrighteousness" and have "refused to love the truth" (v. 10-12). No. They are of His *beloved*. And what does it mean to be the beloved of the Lord?

The answer to that question is what leads to Paul's thankfulness to God. He is thankful because God has *chosen them* to be saved. Listen to one commentator as he describes this *choosing*:

...and this [choosing] is an act of God the Father, in Christ, from eternity; and which arises from his sovereign good will and pleasure, and is an instance of his free grace and favour, for the glorifying of himself; and is irrespective of the faith, holiness, and good works of men; all which are the fruits and effects, and not the motives, conditions, or causes of electing grace. This act is the leading one to all other blessings of grace, as justification, adoption, calling, and glorification, and is certain and immutable in itself, and in its effects (Gill).

So Paul is thankful because he is persuaded of better things about the Thessalonians than what is described of those in the preceding verses, namely that they are *chosen*. Paul states that he and his colleagues are under obligation to thank God "always!" Why always? Because God's work will not fail. "Those he whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified (Romans 8:30). If salvation was according to man's work or abilities, Paul would have no such reason for such a confidence or steadfastness in his thanksgiving.

What are, in part, the means through which this "choosing" is effected? We see in the latter portion of v. 13 that it is by the *Spirit who sanctifies us* -by eternally setting us apart to the perfect holiness of Christ once for all, and then progressively imparting this practical holiness to us as we go and grow in our daily walk. It is also by faith, or "believing in the truth." This believing is not mere assent to the truth, but a "cordial embracing of it, a believing in Christ [an act of hope, reliance, trust, and dependence]" (Gill) – and this also comes to pass not because of man's choosing, but because of God's. This "belief in truth" or faith is not the cause of election, but the effect of it. Because it is nec-

essary to salvation, it is appointed as a means (Ephesians 2:8-9), which ensures all the elect will demonstrate it. Because even our faith is the outworking of God's choice, the Thessalonians, as well as we, can be confident that we will never be "finally and totally deceived, or be carried away with the error of the wicked" (Gill) (vv.11-12), even not by one so crafty and deceiving as the antichrist spoken of in vv. 1-12. It does not depend on us, but God.

And we are "called" to this salvation through the wonderful gospel (v.14) (Romans 10:14-18), by hearing the good news told. - all of this will lead to our obtaining the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not that we earn this glory by our merit, but that we will possess it because of Christ's work alone - In John 17 (v.22), in an already not yet sense, Christ tells us that the glory given Him by God, He [Christ] has given to us (cf. Romans 8:17, 29; 2 Timothy 2:10). As a sidebar, one should also note that we can see all three members of the Trinity clearly at work here in the redemptive process.

Are you encouraged? Is your confidence and sureness of our God's ability to keep you until His Son returns aroused? Do you believe that He can keep you from being deceived by one even so powerful as the antichrist whom Satan stands directly behind? Paul does. And he is compelled to thanksgiving to God for the sureness of God's work on the Thessalonian's behalf. In our prayers to God, whether for ourselves or others, are we regularly (always) expressing deep gratitude to God for His sovereign work in redemption accomplished through His Son? Confident that He knows how to rescue those that are His own. Speaking words of thanks to God in prayer for these things is the antidote to getting off track in our beliefs about Christ's return - whether we fear we have missed Him, that His return is imminent, or that He will never come. It will also help our unbelief as we actively work to express thanks to God for those things that are true, as many of us come to God, even as believers, with many doubts about what God can or will do...like the father in Mark 9, we cry, "I believe, help my unbelief!"

Stand firm in your adherence to the truth (v.15)

In v.15 then, we see Paul boldly exhorting the Thessalonians. Although we emphasize this often from the pulpit here at Clearcreek, I do not believe we are in any danger of overstating it: In the Scripture, we never see God's sovereignty being used as a rationale for inaction. Rather, it functions to compel, to propel, to thrust us, as believers, into wholehearted action and resolve. To put this in plain language, Paul does not say to the Thessalonians, "God has it all under control, find a comfy spot for your laurels and sit it out. Join the club! The water's fine. Pull up a chair! Don't worry about doctrinal accuracy, don't worry about getting clear on what is true. Don't trouble yourself with doing the hard work of good for the kingdom (3:13). He'll find you when He needs you." No, quite the opposite. He tells the Thessalonians, "so then, brothers, STAND FIRM and HOLD TO..." Just as throughout the rest of this epistle Paul is calling the Thessalonians to action. A biblical belief in the sovereignty of God, always leads to *active obedience* not *passive repose*.

And what are we to stand firm *in* and hold firmly *to*? Apostolic truth. That is, what we have given to us in the New Testament. We know from other New Testament passages that this is certainly not to the exclusion of the Old Testament (Luke 24, 2 Timothy 3:16-

17, I Corinthians 10). And although we will not make much of it here, we know that Paul is not referring to “traditions established by men” such as Rome/the Catholic church would argue, wrongly, from this passage. He is referring to those words we have recorded in the canon of Scripture. Nothing more and nothing less.

There is an implicit warning here to the Thessalonians: You fell prey to an imposter, a false teacher, by believing what was written in a falsified letter. You believed something that was other than what I had taught you. And Paul had taught them truth that was NOT in concert with what the falsified letter stated, as made clear by verse 5. The Thessalonians had forgotten, and their forgetfulness and inattention led to wrong belief about the day of the Lord in this case. Paul gently rebukes the Thessalonians. Standing firm and holding to the Scriptural truth requires at least that we *remember* it. And for our memory of it to mean anything, we must understand it. Thereby we must read the Scriptures, grow in our understanding of the Scriptures, attend to the teaching and preaching of the Scriptures that we may discern truth from error. This does not finally do it, however. We can know much of something factually, intellectually, and it will not produce the standing firm or holding to that Paul is speaking of. Hundreds of professors in secular schools of theology prove this every day. To stand firm in the truth and to hold to it, we must love it. Love of Christ, who is truth, will bind us more fast to the truth than any level academic learning ever could. However, our love of Christ should ever compel us to growth in our knowledge of the truth, as it changes and transforms us for His glory.

So in this day and age, as in all other days and ages, where false teachers, false teaching, and error abound, we should pray that we would be those will ever grow in our understanding of and love for the truth of Scripture, the person of Christ. Pray that we would be disciplined in attending to this duty and this delight – to grow in our understanding of the Word. We should pray that we would not be fooled by teachings which appear to be in concert with Scripture but are not.

Know the comfort produced by God’s love through grace (v. 16-17)

Lastly, we come to a benediction. Paul is utilizing a declarative prayer to summarize in intercession what he desires for the Thessalonians. This benediction reads: [READ v. 16-17]. This prayer for the Thessalonians flows directly from what has been established in verses 13-15. Paul makes His request to none other than those who can grant it, who will grant it, and who want to grant it: The *Lord Jesus Christ* – our Lord because He has married us, the church; Jesus because is our Saviour/Redeemer; and Christ, our returning prophet, priest, and king. And God our Father – Father because we have been adopted and we are brothers with Christ. They have *loved us* and in doing so have given us *eternal comfort and good hope*. How is it that we have this eternal comfort and good hope? Only by grace – God’s favor upon us as secured by Christ’s complete and sufficient work. This comfort is eternal because Christ’s work is everlasting (Hebrews 9:26), we are no longer at enmity with God, we are objects of His love and recipients of His peace (v. 16). Our hope is good because God is the author of it and He is infinitely good and His Son has made it sure – we have not an earthly hope, but a heavenly one, anchored upward.

Paul concludes by asking that this comfort would be applied to the Thessalonian's hearts. That they would not be *quickly shaken in mind* or become *alarmed* (v.2). That they would be *established in every good work and word* or that God would make them unfaltering, unwavering, unshakable that they might flourish in their practical obedience to the Lord and their commitment to the Good Word, every truth of the gospel; that they might not be misled as they were at the time of the writing of this epistle. In short, that in every good principle and practice they would always follow through.

Should we pray any differently for ourselves? Are we not often misled and unbelieving? Are we quickly unsettled and undone by errant teaching? Do we lack comfort because of our own tendency to wander from the truth? Specifically, in our functional beliefs about the return of Christ, do we live in a way that overvalues the here and now because we do not truly believe that things are as God has promised? Namely that Christ will return. Or do we live in a manner that undervalues the here and now because we reason that Christ is coming anytime now, so I'll just kick back and passively wait? Are we pensive and anxious, depressed or despondent, overcome or forlorn, because we have forgotten the truth that He is coming again and He will not pass us by? Brothers and sisters, pray for yourselves and for each other that we would know comfort and that we would be made unmovable in our obedience and belief in the good Word.

So what applications and observations can be made from the text we have considered?

Applications and Observations

1. In the realization that we live in the midst of eschatological reality, history is not circular, Christ is returning, we should:
 - a. In prayer, thank God for the certainty and confidence we have in His electing

- f. With these things in mind, we might pray: “Father, I thank you for, in your sovereignty, choosing _____ as your own. I praise you for sanctifying him/her through the Spirit and causing them to believe the truth and that this will ultimately result in _____ enjoying the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. I pray that you will make him/her to stand firm in the truth of Scripture, that you will give them comfort and hope through grace, and that you would establish them in every good work and Your good word. Amen.

Several other applications can also be gleaned:

2. As a church, both sheep and shepherds, we should be employing a healthy level of self-consciousness about ourselves as a body. Would Paul set us forth as exemplary? Would we stand firm in persecution? Are we abounding and growing in love for one another? Is our faith growing? Do we receive the word with the joy of the Holy Spirit, etc.?
3. As elders do we function much as Paul does with the Thessalonians? Faithfully watching over the flock, correcting error, commending obedience, comforting the shaken and alarmed?
4. Errors in doctrine lead to errors in living (or put alternatively, orthodoxy leads to orthopraxy).

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