

2 Thessalonians 3:1-2

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 June 2019

Preacher: Ben Fiddian

[0 : 00] In fact, we're going to read two passages. So first of all, in 1 Thessalonians, we'll read chapter 1. And then we're going to turn over to the next letter and read from the end of that letter, 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, verses 1 to 5.

We begin with 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. Let us hear God's word. Paul, Silas, and Timothy, to the Church of the Thessalonians, in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace and peace to you. We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power and the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 18] And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, your faith in God has become known everywhere.

Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. And to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. Then if you'll turn with me to the next letter, 2 Thessalonians, we're going to read in chapter 3, verses 1 to 5.

Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored just as it was with you.

And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

[2 : 25] We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.

If you want to follow with me this evening, I want us to look at two verses from 2 Thessalonians chapter 3.

The first two verses where Paul writes, Finally, brothers, pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored just as it was with you.

And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. In this text then, we have simply an exhortation for the church to gather to pray corporately for the ministry of God's words.

Paul gives two reasons, two aspects to this prayer. The first is that the word of the Lord would advance successfully.

[3 : 42] would speed ahead and be honored. And the second aspect to this is that God's servants would know his protection and his deliverance from those who are opposed to the gospel in light of the fact that not all have faith.

So this text is teaching us that the prayer for the gospel to advance is not just the responsibility of the ordained ministry of the pastors and the elders, that it is the duty of every Christian to pray that God's word would be successful in penetrating the hearts of sinful human beings.

It is true that prayer is a special duty of those who are set aside to preach. The apostolic model in Acts 6-4 is we will give ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.

And yet Paul, who would have lived on that principle, frequently covets the prayers of the churches in his letters. Romans 15, 30-32.

Philippians 1, 18-20. Let's just read a couple of examples. Ephesians 6 and verse 19 and 20. Pray also for me, Paul says, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains.

[5 : 29] Pray that I may declare it fearlessly as I should. It requests that the Colossians would pray that he would have a door opened wide for the ministry of the word.

So it was his special duty as a preacher to give himself to prayer. And yet he exhorted the churches to join him in praying.

Paul then had a clear mission. The Lord told him what he would suffer on his behalf. And he had a comprehensive message. He preached the cross of Jesus Christ as the power of God and to salvation.

He preached the whole counsel of God. But he knew that he wouldn't have a completed ministry if he was left on his own. He knew there was a sense in which he could only fulfill what the Lord had laid on his plate through the prayers of God's people.

So he exhorts them, finally, brothers, pray for us. The formal preaching of the word then is in the hands of a minority within the church.

[6 : 38] But that can only continue and that can only have its maximum effect as the whole church joins in prayer behind the preacher.

Often we find it easier to recognize the need to support ministers and missionaries in practical, visible ways, like finances and so on.

Prayer is by nature invisible to the public eye. Jesus said, when you go to pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.

And perhaps because here we're engaging with matters of spiritual importance, things which we can only see with the eye of faith, not with the eye of the flesh. For that reason, we need to be reminded regularly and exhorted, like these Thessalonian Christians, to take this responsibility seriously.

A carriage will pick up speed as all the horses pull together. An Olympic rowing boat requires that everyone is pulling on the oar in the same rhythm.

[7 : 52] The gears of the gospel, if you like, the gears of gospel preaching turn most smoothly when they're oiled with the prayers of the whole church.

Let's consider, first of all then, an explanation of why we need prayer in relation to the ministry of the words. Paul makes this request for himself.

Pray for us. Pray for me. Pray for my team, he is saying. But then he doesn't ask them to pray for his personal success.

He doesn't say pray for me so that I can be the best missionary, the best preacher in town. He doesn't say pray for me that I would have a comfortable life, plenty of money in my pocket and not too many opponents.

His prayer for himself is this, that God's word would advance, that scripture may speed ahead. Paul is dedicated to the service of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 02] He's so set aside to advance his master's kingdom that his agenda is that Jesus would be known, not that Paul would be known.

He says, doesn't he, in the letter to Galatians, I've been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

And so preaching for Paul was not about making himself known. It was about making the words of God known. He preached as he lived, not to show off his intellect, his knowledge, his achievements, his abilities, but to present the glories of God's wisdom and God's righteousness and God's power. The word of Christ was dwelling richly in Paul's heart and he couldn't help but overflow in his prayers that the word of the Lord would progress regardless of the cost to him.

We often pray that the preacher would know God's help and God's assistance and that's important. It's a fearful thing to stand in a pulpit on a platform and speak from God's word to God's people.

[10 : 20] It's demanding spiritual work. It can leave a strong man feeling physically and emotionally drained. Preachers need your prayers.

But the goal is not to get the pastor through this week in a fit state to preach again next week. The goal is to get God's word into people's hearts.

To get God's words into the hearts of unbelievers with power to convict them and to convert them.

To get God's word into our own hearts with power to make us grow in holiness and in knowledge of

the Lord.

The goal is not the success of the preacher. The goal is the success of the gospel. Imagine a boxer. He might have the perfect physique.

He might have great stamina but he doesn't win the bout until he lands that killer punch. And you might have the perfect preacher with the perfect sermon illustrations and the perfect outline.

[11 : 28] But it all comes to nothing unless the gospel gets deep into the hearts of the people. Do you value God's word like Paul valued it?

A true Christian sees the scripture as spiritual light, as spiritual food. Our whole eternity depends on this book.

So like the disciples we would say where else should we go? You have the words of eternal life. Our appetites for spiritual things can ebb and flow.

But if you've never delighted in God's word like that, if you've never tasted this and seen that it's sweeter than honey, if you've never craved it as a baby craves milk, you need to examine your heart.

Do you have that eternal life which is received by faith when you hear this word? Those of us who are Christians, we may have a degree of success as preachers with natural ability and so on.

[12 : 45] But the success of the word is something that only God can give. We can't stir that up, we can't achieve that. God gives it as you pray.

James stands here regularly, other men stand here regularly and preach God's word faithfully. It will only have its maximum effect as you join behind them in seeking God's blessing.

But you might raise an objection at this point. You might say that God's word cannot fail. It must succeed because it has a life and a power of its own. It's living and active.

It's sharper than a two-edged sword. God himself has said that it will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Why then shall we pray? All this objection is both right and wrong. It's correct so far as it goes. The scripture is God's word objective fact.

[13 : 50] Every time this is read God speaks and we should be listening. It has divine sanction and authority. That's why Paul could rejoice even when evil men were preaching for evil motives.

But this is only one side of the truth. Yes God is sovereign and powerfully at work in his word but that doesn't give us an excuse to be fatalistic to be passive or to be indifferent.

It is the sovereign Lord's word and he gets to choose where and when it is most effective. He's given us the responsibility to listen to his word and to preach his word by his design.

For example in the Westminster larger catechism question 155 says how is the word made effectual to salvation? And the answer is the spirit of God makes the reading but especially the preaching of the word an effectual means to enlighten convince and humble sinners to drive them out of themselves and draw them to Christ.

The spirit then has chosen to use the preached word without question 160 says what is required of those that hear the preached word?

[15 : 18] And this is the answer. It is required of those that hear the word preached that they attend upon it with diligence preparation and prayer.

We can't come to God's words in difference with our mind filled with other things and expect to be blessed by it.

We come dependent on him by prayer. If you like this is the belt of truth but it will only protect you as a piece of armor if you put it on and pull it tight.

The Lord has chosen to advance his kingdom through preaching spirit filled men preaching with love and faith in their hearts chosen by Christ and set aside by the church to that task.

The Holy Spirit isn't a bare knuckle fighter. He takes up a sword. He goes into battle but he doesn't leave the sword in the sheath. He takes up a preacher like Paul and puts him on like a gauntlet and then wields the sword with almighty power and omniscient precision to make every blow count whether to strike a sinner with conviction or to heal a grieving saint.

[16 : 40] It's his choice to do this as the whole church prays that God's word would speed ahead and be honored. Preaching doesn't happen automatically.

It doesn't happen mechanically. God has designed it to function in the relational context of the church or in it together as a body. James can put the arrow in the bow but he needs the strength of the whole church to pull the string back and let it fly with God's almighty power.

God has ordained that his word won't come back to him empty but has he not also ordained that true prayer won't come back to him empty. Jesus said if you abide in me and my words abide in you ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.

Can you join Paul in this exhortation? Is it your wish that God's word would speed ahead and be honored because that is a prayer that the Lord delights to answer.

An explanation then of the need for prayer in relation to the ministry of the word. Secondly consider the experience of answered prayer in relation to the ministry of the word.

[18:06] Paul asks them to pray that it would speed ahead and be honored and he's confident that they'll understand what he means because he goes on to say just as it was with you just as happened in your experience.

He's confident that they'll know what he's talking about. If we combine the story in Acts 17 of how the church of Thessalonica was formed with the passage in 1 Thessalonians 1 that we read we see that the gospel made rapid progress in Thessalonica.

Acts 17:2 suggests that Paul may only have been there for three weeks reasoning in the tabernacles and some people were persuaded in that time and then because of intense threat of persecution the Christians sent Paul away and yet look at that description in 1 Thessalonians 1 a church that had formed in just three weeks and yet the gospel came in power and in the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction and they became imitators of the apostles experiencing the gospel receiving the gospel with joy in spite of much suffering the church which formed in this pressure cooker of a short intense time with much persecution became an example to all the churches in the surrounding areas verse 7 of 1

Thessalonians 1 tells us so it made rapid progress there and it was also revered and propagated the progress was rapid because of the way they received God's word 1 Thessalonians 2:13 says they received the word of God not as though it were the word of men but as it actually is the word of God they recognized what it was they recognized that this is God speaking they honored the Bible they honored the gospel as they ought to as the very word of God receiving God's word in that way they turned from idols to serve the living and true God to wait for his son returning from heaven whom he raised from the dead Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come they turned from pagan lifestyles in that short period of time and then they trumpeted the gospel like a loud brass instrument like a herald hear ye hear ye blow the trumpet and it sounded and it resounded through

Macedonia and Achaia isn't it encouraging to remember in days like ours where the gospel often faces rampant secularism and indifference isn't it encouraging to remember that it's not always been like that that we can read in the Bible of situations where in just a few weeks in just a few days God saved many many people turned lives around changed communities changed families in New Testament times and subsequent history there have been these periods of reformation and of revival where the Lord adds his blessing to the word in a special way and turns the world upside down it's thrilling to realize that well we may be feeling a spiritual depression here in other parts of the world

[21:58] God's word is speeding ahead and being honored in parts of Asia and Africa and South America the church is growing times are hard here then perhaps but God's word is still having an impact even in the ones and twos but who knows that through our prayers God may even bring another time where Scotland is known as the land of the book because the word of the Lord is speeding ahead and being honored a third thing then the essential need for prayer in relation to the ministry of the word the very fact that Paul is asking for prayer tells us that no human energy or activity can cause the word of God to go forward like that he directs this prayer to almighty

God who alone can provide that dynamic power that divine omnipotence why is such power necessary why won't the gospel make progress just because it's true simply put it is because our sinful human hearts have no native desire for God's truth back to 2 Thessalonians 3 not everyone has faith verse 2 here refers to wicked and evil men who will do everything they can to oppose the gospel going forward verse 3 of 1 Thessalonians 2 talks about the need for strength and protection against the evil one it could possibly mean evil in a general sense but most translations render it this way the personal spiritual being the fallen angel who initiates and inflames evil in the world the word of the

Lord doesn't advance by natural means because not all have faith there are powers of supernatural evil opposed to God vehemently opposed to the things of God there are faithless men and women

who are happy to align themselves with that anti Christian agenda this is the judgment John 3 19 says the light has come into the world and people love the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil it's only the grace of the Lord which keeps his servants faithful and fearless in gospel work even Paul himself asked the question who's sufficient for these things and the only answer he could give is when Jesus met with him and said my grace is sufficient for you whilst not everyone opposes the gospel with quite so much animosity we could expand verse 2 not everyone has faith we could expand that and say by nature no one has faith

Romans 3 tells us that no one is righteous no not one no one understands no one seeks for God all have turned aside and together they have become worthless no one does good not even one before a person is regenerated by the spirit of God and converted to Christ they are dead in trespasses and sins they walk following the course of this world under the tyranny of the prince of the power of the air the spirit that's at work in the sons of disobedience Paul says we all walked that way once upon a time by nature we were all children of wrath we all had minds set on the things of the flesh which were hostile to God why Lord won't speed ahead by natural means because we're gripped in supernatural darkness by nature spiritually blind living in a black world where Satan fills our minds with with his lies and his deceit in order to keep us in utter darkness the word of the Lord speeds ahead then and is honored only as the spirit of God converts hearts opens blind eyes and stops deaf ears so that they may turn from darkness to light and the power of Satan to God so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Christ perhaps you are a person who hates God and actively opposes the gospel or perhaps you're a person who sits quietly in church year after year mouthing Christian words but staying spiritually dead and blind politely hostile to God you don't need to stay in that condition forever God's word tells his people to pray so that the word would have a penetrating life-changing effect in people just like you the Christians around you even in this very room have been praying for people just like you look into almighty God that he would take this gospel message and drive it into your spiritually dark hearts

God is willing and able to save people just like you add your cry then as the Christians plead with him to make his word effective add your cry for mercy determine that with his help you're going to turn your back on sin because he has never yet turned away a soul who responded to Christ's call with sincere faith and repentance God has charged us with calling down his almighty power to make the gospel effective in hearts like yours and those of us a Christian have sat where you sit those of us who are already believers have sat in that darkness and it's only by this divine miracle that we have come to value God's word in this way it happened to us like it happened to those Thessalonians as Christians it is right that we should seek opportunity to share God's word outreach activities regular meetings conversations in daily life but we have to remember that none of these things achieve anything unless the Lord adds his blessing unless the Lord builds the house they labor in vain who build it but let this be our encouragement to pray hard and to preach hard there's power available here for all the obstacles to unbelief that we see in the world around us [30 : 08] Jesus has said I will build my church the gates of hell will not prevail against it this work of gospel transformation is ultimately in the hands of one who is seated far above all rulers and authorities all the spiritual powers of wickedness all those spiritual evils in heavenly places far beneath his feet and he has all authority in heaven on earth including the authority to give eternal life to whoever he chose remember then that Christ doesn't always do his work doesn't always build his church at the same rate in every place every time this work that took a matter of weeks in Thessalonica took 18 months in Corinth and two years in Ephesus in our own lives we know there are times when God's word comes with dynamic power and there are other times where we seem to be going through a bog or a marsh everything is slow progress is slow there are times of refreshing that come from the presence of the Lord but there are dry seasons and wilderness experiences too we have to preach the word out of season as well as in season we wish we were always reaping but there are times of plowing and sowing and watering and waiting and yet is it not the hope of an abundant harvest that motivates the farmer to keep on in his work when the progress is slow then and the word is despised by the masses let us remember that we have a weapon here in prayer that can change that situation can turn it around so that by calling on the Lord he can turn the tide and his word can once more go forward quickly and powerfully one day winter will give way to spring one day the seasons of decline will give way to seasons of new growth finally reflecting on this is there not some great wisdom in the age old advice people used to give the advice when you become a Christian prioritize the Sunday meetings that's where the preaching

is done prioritize the midweek meeting that's where we join together to pray to get behind the preacher to call God's blessing down

I can't think of greater advice it seems to me that that rings true that proves true perhaps you've proved that true we cannot simply be content with listening to the preaching we can't simply be content with a group fellowship midweek we're about God's business we're about the advance of his kingdom and that means we need these two sides of the coin the preaching and the praying and we need to be in that together we want to make sure that we're not going through the motions of hearing God's word without seeking his blessing both for ourselves and for others God is willing to answer our prayers this is a prayer that he's inspired by his spirit it's the spirit who tells us to pray like this can we not go confident of God's willingness faithfulness to listen to such a prayer and in his way and in his time to answer finally brothers pray for us that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured as happened among you and that we may be delivered from evil men for not all have faith and I'm sure

Paul could say of this congregation as he said of the church we have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do that which the Lord commands Amen