



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Lesson 5

Summer 2020

"Prayer, Evangelism, And Election"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you, Seth. And good morning to all of you. It's nice to be with you. Our text this morning is 2 Thessalonians, chapter 3, verses 1-5. So we're coming to the close of this brief but very interesting book of 2 Thessalonians. Paul writes,

¹ Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as *it did* also with you; ² and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith. ³ But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil *one*. ⁴ We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will *continue to* do what we command. ⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word, and bless our time of studying it together. Let's bow together in a word of prayer.

Father, what a privilege it is to be together with Your people this morning, to be here on the Lord's day, and do what we are doing; fellowshiping together, singing hymns of praise together, reading the Scriptures together, and then in few moments, consider the meaning of this text. And Father, as we do that, we are reminded and will

be reminded from our passage, as we are all through Scripture, that You are sovereign. As Isaiah said, "You sit on the vault of the earth, and all if its inhabitants below are as grasshoppers." (Is 40:22). And what a comfort that is—a comfort that You reign, and You rule over heaven and earth, over the entire universe; and You, our Father, are for us. —That is a great blessing.

Father, we ask Your blessing on us in this hour to give us an understanding of the things that we have just read and how it all applies to us. Move us to pray and evangelize. —It's Your will for us. We are lax in that so many times, so often, and yet we pray, Lord, that You will galvanize us to be these kind of people—the kind of people who pray and who reflect Your grace to those around us and speak of it at the proper time, as Paul speaks of in this text.

Bless our nation, Father. Bless our government with wisdom, and bless Your church throughout this land and across the globe on this Lord's day. And bless us as we open Your Word and as we study it together. It is the means You use to sanctify us and conform us to the image of Christ and give us wisdom to live day by day for You and for the blessing of others around us. So Lord, we commit our time to You, and we thank You for it, in Christ's name. Amen.

Early in Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus faced a hard choice when he had to navigate his ship through a narrow channel that went between two monsters, Scylla and Charybdis. He could only avoid one by passing by the other. Either way it was destruction. "Between Scylla and Charybdis" became proverbial for a dilemma, having to choose the lesser of two evils. The phrase has been applied to the doctrines of Divine Election and Predestination over against Evangelism and Prayer, by those who feel they are mutually exclusive. If you choose one, you lose the other.

Charles Spurgeon was once asked to reconcile the two. He was a great soul winner who believed in predestination, (I quoted him last week on Divine Election). The questioner must have felt that he had trapped the preacher; that he had him on the horns of a dilemma. But Spurgeon answered, "I wouldn't try. I never reconcile friends."

In other words, there is no need to reconcile them. Both are taught in Scripture, so they cannot contradict or cancel each other out. These doctrines must be in perfect harmony with one another. In fact, they work together in mutual support in God's perfect plan, because the God who ordained the end has ordained the means to the end. Prayer, the means for blessing—evangelism, the means of salvation.

Paul believed that, because having taught divine election in chapter 2, he asks for prayer for the Gospel in chapter 3. Prayer and evangelism are the means of bringing the elect to salvation. It is predestination and election that make both prayer and evangelism possible.

So Paul begins chapter 3, "Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly." Paul believed fervently in prayer. At the end of chapter 2 he prayed for the saints in Thessaloniki. That's not surprising. Paul knew the importance of prayer, that we won't receive if we don't ask. Jesus emphasized that all through His ministry. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you." (Mat 7:7). So Paul prayed for his friends in Thessaloniki.

What may seem a little surprising, is here, at the beginning of the chapter, chapter 3, the great apostle asks the Thessalonians to pray for him, "Finally brethren, pray for us." But in that request, Paul both revealed God's absolute sovereign power and grace and indicated the source of his own greatness as a man. It didn't reside in him. It didn't reside in his natural gifts, (which were many). He studied under the great rabbi, Gamaliel, and advanced beyond his contemporaries. He was a rising star in Judaism before being humbled and brought to faith in Christ and made an apostle.

Still, it was not Paul's intellectual abilities and his spiritual gifts that made him successful in the Christian life or in his worldwide ministry, as important as those were. It was his dependence on the Lord. And so he often asked the saints, simple believers, to pray for him because he knew they had as much access to God as he did. And he needed God's power and blessing in order to reach his goals. As he told the Philippians, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." So he looked to the only one who could strengthen him and bless him in his ministry.

That's the reason we pray; because God is absolutely sovereign over all things, circumstances, and souls. If He were not, why pray? Why look to Him when the burden is solely upon us? Why seek His help when He cannot help, or will not help? But God can help. He is sovereign. So the apostle asked the Thessalonians to pray for his ministry, that the Gospel will spread rapidly; that his ministry there in Corinth, (where Paul was—where he had written this letter from), would meet with great success. And that, too, is based directly on the doctrine of election taught in chapter 2. In fact, it is only because there are the elect, those chosen by God for salvation, that evangelism could succeed.

In Romans 3, I think I read this last week, but these passages are very key to our understanding of things of our own nature. But in Romans 3, Paul quotes David from Psalm 14; so this is both Old Testament and New Testament theology. He quoted David to describe the human condition, he says, "There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks for God," (Rom 3:10-11). No one seeks for God naturally. And that's the natural man that's being described there, unaided by God's grace. Later, in Romans 8, verse 7, he says that man "is hostile toward God"; —at enmity with God; at war with God—and not able to subject himself to God.

So how do we account for conversions if that's the case? How do we account for these Thessalonians believing? The answer is, God's sovereign grace. He chose them for salvation through faith in Christ. And I should emphasize that election is 'to' things. That is, it's 'to' salvation. It is 'to' salvation through sanctification. Election is 'to' faith. You're elected 'to' believe in Christ. That makes evangelism possible.

Still, Paul knew he would face a lot of opposition. In chapter 2, verse 7, Paul spoke of "the mystery of lawlessness" that is at work now. Satan is alive and well in the world, and the implacable foe of the Gospel and the people of God. So Paul asks for prayer for that, in verse 2, "...that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith." There are lots of unbelievers who are aggressively evil; and in Paul's day there were many who were avidly opposed to him.

The reason they were to pray for the Lord to overcome that relentless opposition that was stronger than the apostle himself, was because God controls and

orders all souls and circumstances. And so they were to look to Him for the help they needed. In fact, when Paul experienced strong opposition in Corinth, (after the synagogue rejected Paul and rejected the Gospel and he left very discouraged), the Lord appeared to him in a night vision. It's recorded in Acts, chapter 18, verses 9 and 10, and the Lord said to him, "Do not be afraid *any longer*, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." 'Don't be discouraged, Paul. I have many elect ones in this city. The elect are out there. Preach the word. Be faithful. They will come, and the work will succeed. I'm in control.' It's by means of prayer and preaching that evangelism and sanctification, (being built up in the faith), happen. God's plan is fulfilled by the means that God has established for us.

There is a false idea about prayer that, we ask, we pray, in order to change God's mind and alter His plan. And if we pray long enough and fervently enough, we will do that. That's completely false, and we can be glad that it is. Can you imagine the utter chaos that would occur if our requests which contradicted one another were answered? In fact, how could that be? It's a logical absurdity, as well as a nightmare. What if two people were praying for the same job? How could they both be answered? How could two people praying for the same person to be married to? How could that be answered?

And it's completely foolish for it presumes that we know better than God—that our desire is better than His eternal, all wise plan for us. Our prayers are not to alter God's will but to achieve His will. It is, again, a means God has given us for having success in evangelism and bringing His elect ones to faith and salvation.

So Paul asked the Thessalonians to pray. And the sense of that in verse 1 is, "keep praying." It's a present tense, and that often has a durative sense. So "pray continuously", is what he's saying. That's how successful prayer occurs.

We want immediate answers. We all want that. It's human to want to get what we want right now. And so we pray for that and hope for that, but doesn't always come immediately. Prayer isn't always answered immediately, and that, I think, is how God has arranged things. We have to continue in prayer to obtain His blessing. It tests our

faith and our faithfulness; and it strengthens us ultimately. So it challenges us. We have to pray continually.

George Müller knew that. He was a man of faith and prayer; and like Spurgeon a consistent Calvinist. It was said that thousands of souls were saved in answer to George Müller's prayers. In an interview he spoke of two men for whom he had prayed every day for 52 years. They were sons of a childhood friend of his and he said, "They are not converted yet, but they will be." He said, "The great fault of the children of God is they do not continue in prayer. They do not go on praying; they do not persevere." He did. And the rest of the story is: The two men he prayed for were converted, one shortly before Müller's death at the age of 92, and the other shortly after he died.

He was following Paul's instruction here to the Thessalonians when he told them in verse 1 to pray continuously, pray fervently, "that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as *it did* also with you;" Now that's an interesting statement, because literally it is that the Word of the Lord "may run and be glorified."

He probably took his metaphor about running from the stadium and the Olympic games. Corinth, where Paul was writing, was the location of the Isthmian Games, which were very much like the Olympic games. In fact, I think the Isthmian Games were played the year before those in Olympia. So he may have had that athletic image here in his mind, like an Olympic runner who won the contest and was crowned with glory. So too the Gospel—running throughout Corinth would be glorified by souls saved from philosophy or religion. That's how Paul lived, and witnessed for Christ. Not passively, not with the attitude of 'why worry about the lost; if God has chosen them, they'll all be saved.' No, God will save them by means of their hearing the Gospel preached by the missionary or the witness, and believing it.

Election is to salvation through faith in the Savior and therefore they need, (the elect need), a preacher and an evangelist. So Paul was like an athlete, competing in the games; running and boxing and fighting for souls. And he needed the saints' prayers, so that the Gospel would prevail and spread throughout Corinth the way that it has spread throughout Thessaloniki.

Paul never felt that he was between Scylla and Charybdis. Prayer and evangelism are the means God has given us to achieve the purpose He has already ordained to occur. When we are obedient, we win. God's will is always done. Never frustrated. So, we are to do it continually. Pray continually "for I have many people in this city."

Paul's statement in verse 3 should only add to that confidence in the ministry and the Christian life. He begins, "But the Lord is faithful." He was being opposed in Corinth by people without faith. They, in Thessaloniki, were being opposed by the same kind of people—hostile enemies of the Gospel, persecutors of the church. But the faithlessness of their enemies could not overthrow the faithfulness of the Lord, Who promised His disciples, "Lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age." (Mat 28:20). That's a promise.

The Lord always keeps His promises. He's always faithful to His Word. We see that all through Scripture. We see that in the Old Testament, we see that in the New Testament. In 1 Samuel, chapter 3, in verse 19, it is said of the prophet Samuel, "Thus Samuel grew and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fail." "Let none of the words of the prophet fail", because the words of Samuel were the words that God had given to him. God is faithful to His Word.

I love that statement in Isaiah 55:11, where the prophet speaks of God's Word and says, "It will never return to Him void", (or never return to Him empty). That's a promise. God's Word always had its intended effect.

And when He called Jeremiah (Jer 1:12), He said to him, "I am watching over My word to perform it." It won't fail. He keeps His Word. And that means He's faithful to His people. He promised to make Jeremiah invincible. He would make him "as a pillar of iron and as walls of bronze", (Jer 1:18).

That's the assurance the Lord gave His disciples. He can do that. He is Lord. He is God. He is the second person of the Trinity. His power is greater than that of any opponent we may face; any person, anything, whether it's a virus, like this COVID virus, or an enemy that you may have at work or in the neighborhood. He's greater than any

opponent we face. He is with His people always, and He's faithful. He never changes. He is "the same yesterday, today, and forever", (Heb 13:8), and will never leave or forsake us.

So Paul moves from his personal concerns and his request for their prayers for him to their situation—to reassure them that the Lord will provide for them in their present difficulty. He is sovereign over them, and their situation. Still, they, (His people), are responsible to act. They are responsible to resist those who oppose them; to stand for the truth and be His witness to fight the good fight. And to fight the good fight means to fight it wisely. Not be provocative but be wise about what we do and to be steadfast in it. To be good in the good fight that we're to fight.

But the promise that Paul gave them here, (and what he knew from experience), is that the Lord would strengthen them and protect them from the evil one. He was confident in that. The Greek text simply says, "from the evil", but I think F. F. Bruce is correct when he wrote, "The personal evil one forms a more effective antithesis to the personal Lord." So it's a more effective or proper contrast to speak of not just "the evil", but "the evil one" in contrast to the Lord—the one who attacks us as opposed to the One Who protects us.

And that gives us a really true dimension of the opposition that they faced—it was satanic. Paul said, in Ephesians 6, verse 12, "...our struggle is not against flesh and blood...but against spiritual *forces* of wickedness." That's the struggle of the Christian life. The struggle is real for the Christian. It's against a personal enemy, an evil genius as it were. —And it is real. In 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 18, Paul told them that he had tried to visit them more than once, but Satan had hindered him. That's why he needed their prayers in the spiritual battle.

We are engaged, as I say, in a real war. It is a spiritual war against the evil one. We'll never really understand the nature of the world in which we live, and why things occur as they do, if we don't realize that we are in a spiritual conflict. We are in a war against the evil one and we might wonder, who is sufficient to stand against that—

against the devil and his minions and the people that he inspires? Not us. Not in our own strength. We need the prayers of the saints because the Lord is sufficient.

And Paul assures the Thessalonians that He would strengthen, (or establish), and protect them. The reason the Lord would do that is not only His strength, His almighty power, but His faithfulness. He is faithful to His decree to elect and to keep the elect to the very end, to fulfill His decree. He chose them for salvation through faith, and His faithfulness ensures that they will ultimately have that salvation forever in the world to come. They cannot lose eternal life. It wouldn't be eternal life if it could be lost.

But that's the assurance that Paul gave in Philippians, chapter 1, in verse 6, to the Philippian church, where he says, "I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." He begins the work, He continues the work; He completes the work. —He's sufficient. It's the assurance he gave to the Ephesians in Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 30, where he said that the believer has been sealed by the Holy Spirit of God "for the day of redemption", protected to the very end.

The Lord keeps us. But He also works within us to assure and ensure that we persevere through the trials and the temptations by strengthening and establishing us to withstand the various attacks that we undergo; to withstand the doctrinal attacks that Satan makes upon our faith. In Matthew 24, verse 24, Jesus prophesied that during the tribulation, (He speaks of those end times in that portion of Matthew 24), during this time, He said, "False Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect."

Now the church, I believe, will be taken out of the world with the rapture at that time but the Lord will raise up new servants who will carry the Gospel all over the globe. There will be multitudes of believers and they will face great satanic deception and temptation, which will be so powerful, so effective, that, "...if possible", He says, "even the elect would be deceived." "If possible." —But it's not possible, because God will protect them.

That's the future—but it applies today. It applies to us. The devil is deceiving right now, all kinds of people, with all kinds of lies from materialism and naturalism; atheism and secularism; to cults and spiritualism; false religion and counterfeits. And Christians who are weak in doctrine are susceptible to that and to the world's influence. Christians can be naive. But no believer, genuine believer, elect, will ever deny the Gospel. —Not because they're strong in and of themselves—they're not; we're not. —But because God is faithful.

Now the Lord's faithfulness to establish and guard us is not an excuse for idleness. I don't think any of you are taking that away from what I'm saying. But just to reinforce the fact that we are not to be idle in what we do in this life, it's just the opposite—we are to be very, very active in our Christian lives. We need to study. We need to cultivate knowledge and conviction. The elect do that. That, I would say, is a sign of election. And I think it's true that our spiritual strength is proportionate to our effort, to our diligence, and our study in the Christian life. A healthy, fruitful life is based on personal discipline, industry, and carefulness.

In the end, though, it's the Lord who establishes us and guards us in this risky world filled with dangers, both visible and invisible; spiritual and material dangers; temptations and pitfalls. —He is faithful. And because the Lord is faithful, always faithful, Paul encourages the Thessalonians in verse 4 with a statement of confidence: "We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will *continue to* do what we command."

You'll notice his confidence is in the Lord—in His faithfulness to us. "We have confidence in the Lord", but, indirectly it was in them because they were responding to the Lord's leading and to the instruction of the apostle. They were being strong and faithful, and not yielding to the devil and his devices and his agents.

That's what he said at the beginning of the letter, in chapter 1, in verse 4, when he praised them for their "...perseverance and faith in the midst of your persecutions and afflictions..." He could then be confident that they would respond well to the

correction that he gave in chapter 2, about “the day of the Lord”, and not falling for false teaching about it.

His confidence in what the Lord was doing encouraged Paul to pray with confidence in verse 5, "May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ." This is the love God has and it's the steadfastness Christ had and “May the Lord” lead them into, (and by application lead us), a greater understanding of these virtues and the practice of them. God's love for us is unconditional. It seeks the benefit of the other person. May God lead us into the experience and practice of that love, increasingly, and, of course, into an increasing love for the Lord Himself—that is the ‘mark of the Christian’, according to Jesus and the “fruit of the Spirit”, according to Paul. Loving each other and loving the Lord who chose us out of fallen humanity to be His children.

Paul prayed that the Lord would lead them, lead us into that, and give us increasingly “the steadfastness of Christ...”, His endurance in the tests and the trials of life, because He went through them more thoroughly and deeply than any of us will. Satan tried to draw Him away from His mission through His temptations in the wilderness. And then later from the evil counsel given to Him by His own disciple—Peter—who tried to draw Him away from the cross. And it became the most intense in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus prayed about the cup, and dripped sweat mingled with His blood. But He accepted God's will and went forward unflinchingly. May we have that conviction and resolve and live faithfully to the end.

Paul looked to the Lord in prayer for that because he knew that he, (and we), are not sufficient in ourselves. If the apostle Paul wasn't sufficient and needed the blessing and the strength of God, certainly you and I do. We're not sufficient in and of ourselves. The Lord is, and the Lord is faithful.

That fact is seen in these five verses, which are about prayer—prayer for Paul and the advancement of the Gospel, and prayer for the Thessalonians and their advancement in the Christian life. Paul wanted deliverance from evil men who would hinder evangelism. And he wanted them, he wanted the Thessalonians, strengthened to

resist Satan's schemes so that they would continue to persevere in that very difficult situation of persecution.

And again, this emphasis on prayer for evangelism and for protection and spiritual growth shows that there is no contradiction between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Predestination and prayer; election and evangelism are friends. We don't need to reconcile them. They work together as the God given means that achieve the God ordained ends. And maybe, when people give some careful thought to it, they'll find that there is more agreement among these doctrines than they might think.

Charles Simeon gives an example of that very thing. He was one of the great English evangelicals of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and he recorded an account of a conversation that he had with the great evangelist, John Wesley.

"Sir," he said, "I understand that you are called an Armenian. And I have sometimes been called a Calvinist. And therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask a few questions.

"Pray sir," (we don't talk like that anymore but), "Pray sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature?" (We don't talk like that either.) "So depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God if God had not first put it in your heart?"

"Yes," Mr. Wesley said, "I do indeed."

"And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God based on anything you can do and look for your salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?"

"Yes, solely through Christ."

He continued with questions like that. "Are you not somehow upheld in your salvation by your works?"

"No," Wesley said. "I must be saved by Christ from first to last."

"Are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?"

"No," he said.

"Are you upheld every hour by God?"

"Yes," he said, "altogether."

"And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to persevere you into His heavenly kingdom?"

"Yes, I have no hope but in Him."

"Then sir, with your leave, I will put up my dagger again. For this is all my Calvinism, this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance."

So instead of finding those things they could divide over, Simeon concluded, "We will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree." And what they agreed on is, "Salvation is of the Lord. It is all of God's grace." That is true. And because it is, sinners can be saved. The worst of sinners can be saved. And they are.

So if there are any sinners here who want salvation, who want to be cleansed of guilt and to have eternal life, then look to Christ. He's the Savior, the only Savior. Believe in Him, trust in His sacrifice. —That's all. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved," Paul said, (Acts 16:31). It's what the elect do. —They believe. So trust in Christ if you've not done that, and discover that you are one of God's elect.

May God help all of us to continue trusting in Him and living for Him.

Let's give thanks for His grace; and let's give thanks for the elements that we will take in just a few moments as we prepare ourselves for the Lord's Supper. Let's pray.

Father, we do thank You for Your goodness. We come to a simple text like this, five verses, that speak, really, volumes. It will certainly, in light of all that Paul has said in this brief book of 2 Thessalonians: You are sovereign—and yet we're to preach the Gospel. We are to get out there so that it runs through the place where we live. We can only do that by Your strength, and so we must pray to You for that, and we must seek Your blessing in that. And they are blessings that You have ordained and that we can obtain by the means You've given us. So Lord, may we be faithful in the things You've

called us to do. You're sovereign over all things but we are responsible to do and to act. May we do that and be faithful, as You are faithful to us.

Father, we thank You for the greatest act of blessing and faithfulness that You showed to us, and Your Son showed to us, in His death. And so now Lord, as we prepare to take the elements and celebrate the Lord's Supper, as He has instructed us to do, we pray that You would help us to focus upon Him, focus upon what Your grace has provided for us. Give us a sense of gratitude as we do that. Give us a sense of the hope we have because His sacrifice was effective for us; and You accepted it; and You raised Him up from the dead as proof that You accepted His payment for our sins. We thank You for Him, and it's in His name we pray. Amen.

(End of Audio)