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2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

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English Standard Version

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## *“Confidence That Makes Sense”*

This is the 15<sup>th</sup> sermon in the series on 1 & 2 Thessalonians entitled,  
*“Life for the Long Haul.”*

### **2 Thessalonians 3:1-5**

*“Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, <sup>2</sup> and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. <sup>3</sup> But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. <sup>4</sup> And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. <sup>5</sup> May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.”*

*Heavenly Father, we have come to Your Word again this morning and we find that we still need to learn a lot about what it means to do such simple things as praying for others and trusting You. We know we're susceptible to trusting ourselves first. So Lord, once again open our eyes and ears to truly hear and understand and apply this Word to our lives. Use it to direct our hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. Do this for each of us, this morning, in Jesus' name, and for His glory, Amen.*

### **INTRODUCTION: *What's the Context?* <sup>1</sup>**

In an essay entitled “[Do Christians Have a Worldview?](#)” Graham Cole begins with the

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<sup>1</sup> The Introduction is adapted from the article “*Do Christians Have A Worldview?*” by Dr. Graham Cole, [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org) and the article “*The God Who Is There*” By Dr. D. A. Carson, found in the email newsletter [Taste and See](#), [www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org), 2/12/09 .

following lines as his opening paragraph:

He took the blade. It was bright silver. He loved the way it glistened. It felt good in his hand. He cut deep into her chest again and again. He showed no emotion, no recognition of her humanity. She lay motionless, her life gone. He made no attempt to cover the body. Later that night over a beer he openly talked to another person in the bar about what he had done. The other person felt ill.

It sounds pretty bad, right? But just what does that paragraph mean? If, on the one hand, the words refer to a serial killer boasting about his latest savage attack, the sentences are pretty ghastly, and the man in the bar should call the police. If, on the other hand, the words refer to the script of a CSI TV show where a forensic pathologist talks about his autopsy of a particularly interesting case, there is no crime here (though it may demonstrate a lack of professionalism).

How you interpret these lines depends **entirely on the context**.

Now that's a dramatic way to illustrate the importance of context in understanding the Bible. But one of the rules to understanding any passage in the Bible is to know the context first. What's going on here? What's the situation? Who are the people involved? Who's the writer of this text? Who are the readers of this text? Both then and now. If you can't answer any of those questions, you'll never really know what that particular text is trying to say.

And if you go back to when I started this series in May, you may remember that I spent some time explaining the situation that surrounded this new church in Thessalonica. I was trying to **set the context** for these books.

And what I wrote then was this ...

The church in Thessalonica was founded by the Apostle Paul on his second missionary journey in Acts 17, and we know from this book that this was a church built on preaching and teaching of sound doctrine and nurtured with a pastoral ministry of love and devotion. Although it was filled with people who were less than perfect, nonetheless, it was a church where God's Spirit was at work.

However, the brief mission in Thessalonica had been brought to a crushing end. The public riot and the legal charges against the missionaries were so serious that they were persuaded to make a humiliating night flight from the city. Paul's critics took full advantage of his sudden disappearance. In order to undermine his authority and his gospel, they determined to discredit him. So they launched a malicious smear campaign. By studying Paul's self-defense it is possible for us to reconstruct their slanders. 'He ran away', they sneered, 'and hasn't been seen or heard of since. Obviously he's insincere, impelled by the false motives. He's just one more of those phony teachers who tramp up and down the coast of Greece. In a word, he's a fake. He's in it only for what he can get out of it in terms of sex, money, prestige, power, whatever. So when a little opposition arose, and he found himself in danger, he took off and ran away! He doesn't care about you Thessalonians; he's abandoned you! He's much more concerned about his own skin than your welfare.'

It seems likely that some of the Thessalonians were being carried away by this flood of abuse. The facts of Paul's abrupt departure and failure to return seemed to fit the accusations being made against him. His critics' case sounded pretty plausible. So Paul must have found this attack painful and personal. Paul determined to reply to the charges which were being leveled at him, not out of anger or vanity, but because the truth of the gospel and the future of the church were at stake.

That was the first problem this church had to deal with — false teachers and false accusations. And Paul answered those in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians. And as if that wasn't enough, they had another big problem to deal with — the ongoing battle they had with suffering and persecution.

Paul was worried that the Thessalonians' sufferings might lead them astray. Perhaps the best way to protect people from being upset by tribulation is to remind them that **it is a necessary part** of our calling as Christians. He wants them to know that storms often come to believers to enable them to **stand firm**, rather than to blow them away. Apparently the Thessalonians had been taken aback by the unrelenting persecution. Paul reminded them that when he was with them he kept telling them to expect persecution. And circumstances had turned out just as he had said. This reminder of his teaching would have helped calm them down.

And so that's the context of all these verses, all these chapters, both of these books — 1 & 2 Thessalonians. And that's important because these verses don't seem all that special ... until you put them into their proper context.

I mean, what's Paul essentially saying here? You should pray, God is good, you can trust Him, and should depend on Him more and more. Anybody disagree with that? Probably not. Sounds good ... let's eat.

But in the context of being surrounded by false teachers and suffering under persecution, these words take on a whole new meaning, and we discover just how important they really are. So let's dive into these words of the Apostle Paul written to a church facing hard times. And we start with being told ...

#### **v. 1-2: HOW TO PRAY <sup>2</sup>**

*“Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, <sup>2</sup> and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith.”*

Paul couldn't close without asking for their prayers for him. Here's an Apostle, expressing his need for their support. How great to know that even Paul felt that he needed to be prayed for so strongly!

The prayer he requests has nothing to do with his own personal well-being as an end in itself. It's in order that his ministry for Christ might continue and expand. He says ... **“as happened among you.”** Well, what happened among them? They turned to Christ from idols, and then had to deal with being attacked both spiritually and physically through false teachers and persecution. I mean, Paul, I know you're an apostle and all, but are you sure you want what happened here to happen somewhere else?

Specifically here, Paul asks for their prayers in order that **“that the word of the Lord may speed ahead.”** The verb literally pictures the word of the Lord as running swiftly, as in a race. Paul saw the gospel message "running" across the known world, finding converts in every place, just as it had in Thessalonica. The Word is pictured as strong and active. A vivid and similar

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<sup>2</sup> The Exposition of the text is adapted from *The Communicator's Commentary: 1, 2 Thessalonians / 1, 2 Timothy / Titus* by Dr. Gary Demarest, pages 132-135; the sermon *“Praying ... In Light of His Coming”* by Rev. Ron Ritchie, Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, CA, 8/3/86; *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* by Dr. John MacArthur, pages 291-298; *The Gospel & The End of Time: The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians* by Dr. John R. W. Stott, pages 181-190; *ESV Study Bible Notes on 2 Thessalonians* by Dr. Colin Nicholl.

expression was given to us in **Hebrews 4:12**, “*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*”

How encouraging for those of us who preach and teach the Word of God! We are to think not merely of communicating words and ideas, but of releasing and transmitting this **all-powerful, active, and dynamic word of the Lord** into the lives of others. I’m convinced that what’s desperately needed in our time is a growing conviction in **the power**, not of our words, but of **the Word of God**.

This Word, running its course, will be “**honored.**” What could be more gratifying and rewarding than to know that because we’ve taught and proclaimed the Word of God, it’s been received with honor by some people?

The Apostle prayed that the word would not only spread rapidly, but that it would be “**honored.**” When the word of the Lord is “**honored,**” it means that its hidden character is revealed as the word of life, righteousness, and truth. As soon as the word is accepted by faith it begins to adorn the life of the believer. That’s what the apostle wants us praying for.

This is what happened among the Gentiles in Antioch, as we read in Acts 13 following Paul’s sermon there, which concluded with the words, **Acts 13:47-49**, “*For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’ ”*<sup>48</sup> *And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.*<sup>49</sup> *And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.*”

The second part of Paul’s prayer request has to do with the situation from which he sought some relief for both himself and them. He asks them to pray that “***we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith.***”

As he writes from Corinth, there must have been some who were going to great lengths to oppose and hinder the progress of the Word of God there. The word translated “**wicked**” really means “out of place.” It’s usually used of **things**, and this is the only place in the New Testament where it’s used to describe **persons**. Here, then, were people who were totally out of line, and were being actively wicked in opposition to the gospel. The gospel is not always embraced with faith; indeed, it frequently provokes violent hostility.

There are at least five other times in his letters where Paul asks for prayer.

1. In Romans 15:30–32, he asks for prayer for continuing ministry as well as for fellowship with them.
2. In 2 Corinthians 1:9–11, he sees their prayers as a part of his continuing ministry.
3. In Ephesians 6:17–21, he seeks their prayers that he might speak boldly for Christ.
4. In Philippians 1:15–20, he affirms their prayers as a source of strength in his witness in and through his imprisonment in Rome.
5. In Colossians 4:3–4, he solicits their prayers for an open door for his preaching.

Paul couldn’t separate his ministry and preaching from the prayers of his brothers and sisters in Christ. I consider myself blessed to be a pastor who seeks and receives the continuing prayers of the people of this church. And in the same way I think that each of you should consider yourselves blessed when you have the regular prayer support of caring friends.

But knowing how to pray is not all that helpful is we don’t know ...

### **v. 3: WHO TO TRUST**

*“But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.”*

Even as Paul solicits their prayers for his troubles with opposition, he recalls that the Christians in Thessalonica are also under attack. And so comes a word of encouragement and strong affirmation.

There appears to be a play on words at the beginning of this sentence. The last word of verse 2 was *pistis*, *'faith.'* The first word of verse 3 is *pistos*, which means *"faithful"* in the sense of trustworthy. It is obvious that Paul here affirms the faithfulness of God. And what a contrast between this and the unbelief of men and women! Especially stark is the contrast between the **unfaithfulness** of the *"wicked and evil men"* and the **faithfulness** of God. It's at the point of discouragement with people who oppose us or with people who just let us down that **the faithfulness of God** needs to be remembered and reminded of.

And by this contrast Paul is expressing his conviction that the **unfaithfulness** of people cannot possibly overturn the **faithfulness** of God, as shown in His covenant commitment to His people and His word.

Indeed, God's faithfulness to His word is a recurring theme in the Old Testament. It was written of Samuel, for example, **1 Samuel 3:19**, *"And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of His words fall to the ground."*

Again, God said to Jeremiah at the time of his call, **Jeremiah 1:12**, *"Then the Lord said to me, 'You have seen well, for I am watching over My word to perform it.'" He had made a similar promise to Isaiah, **Isaiah 55:11**, "so shall My word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."* Paul shares this assurance.

God in His faithfulness is both the source of our strength, *"He will establish you,"* and the One who guards and protects us *"against the evil one."* God is thus seen as strengthening and guarding us, not just from evil in principle, but from the one who is evil personified. The one Paul warned us about in chapter 2.

This is certainly consistent with Paul's view of evil expressed in **Ephesians 6:12**, *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."*

And that's true; they were engaged in spiritual warfare and so they needed spiritual weapons. Paul had to preach and the Thessalonians had to pray. Yet behind his preaching and their prayers stood the faithful Lord Himself, who watches over His word, and who confirms it by His Spirit in His people's hearts, so that it works in them effectively.

Which is what Paul says about them in **1 Thessalonians 2:13**, *"And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."*

And because they received and accepted the word of God, which they heard from Paul, then they knew ...

#### **v. 4: WHAT TO OBEY**

*"And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command."*

Paul affirms his confidence in them in verse 4 in a way that's very characteristic of him. He expresses faith in the Lord that they will do the things he had commanded them. But if Paul was rightly delivering the Word of God to them, he had every right to put it to them as directly as

he did. In these two letters, he has given them commands ... and he's confident that they're doing what he's told them to do.

In 1 Thessalonians we discover what some of those commands were that Paul is referring to. Here are some of them . . .

**1 Thessalonians 2:12**, “*we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.*”

**1 Thessalonians 3:12**, “*and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you.*”

**1 Thessalonians 4:3**, “*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.*”

**1 Thessalonians 5:11-13**, “*Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. <sup>12</sup> We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, <sup>13</sup> and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.*”

Paul gives lots of other commands to them in 1 Thessalonians 5 ... all of them to be carried out in the strength that God provides. I am always saddened at those among us who know the commands of Scripture and yet refuse to obey them. This past week I heard about someone who claimed to be a Christian and that there was a certain sin in her life which she refused to give up. No matter what was said, her response was essentially, "I want to do what I want to do when I want to do it."

These problems in the Thessalonian church — lack of love, immorality, failure to encourage, failure to respect, failure to live peaceably with others — these aren't unique to them. We have all those same issues. And yet, here Paul says, “*we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.*”

And I think he could say that because he knew, and they knew ...

#### **v. 5: WHERE TO TURN**

Paul concludes this passage with verse 5, “*May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.*”

Again we have one of those beautiful and priceless gems of simple wisdom. He prays that the Lord will direct their hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

The language is unclear as to whether “*the love of God*” means His love for us or our love for Him. Paul's most common usage suggests God's love for us. But in the deepest sense, the two always go together. It is God's love for us that generates our love for Him.

So what does the apostle mean by the phrase “*the steadfastness of Christ*”?

“*Steadfastness*” essentially means “patient endurance.” This is no passive word of endurance in order to survive. It is active and unswerving faithfulness in the midst of any and all adversity, but a faithfulness that takes that adversity and uses it creatively and constructively.

The Thessalonians were under political, social, and religious pressure because of their faith in Christ. Paul prays that their faithful Lord would strengthen and protect them from the evil one: that He would enable them to keep his commands; that they would rejoice in the love of God towards them: and also maintain the kind of faithfulness our Lord had during His own days of suffering.

Peter had the same thought in mind when he wrote, **1 Peter 2:21-23**, “*For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps. <sup>22</sup> He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth. <sup>23</sup> When*

*He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly.”*

The writer of Hebrews refers to “**the steadfastness of Christ**” in these words, **Hebrews 12:1-3**, “*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,* <sup>2</sup> *looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* <sup>3</sup> *Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”*

Jesus Himself is the definition of *steadfastness*, for He took the rejection and the shame of the cross and used it for the redemption of all humankind.

Ultimately all this is good to know, but we have to ask the question ...

**CONCLUSION: What does this look like for us?**

What difference does it make?

**Does knowing how we're to pray help?** What difference does it make to pray “*that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored*” in your life? How should the word of God speed ahead for you? Does that mean you should be reading and listening to it way more than you are now? Probably.

And I know that it's far easier to **say** we should be reading the Bible than it's to actually **take the time** to do it. But Paul asks for prayer that it might “**speed ahead.**” What does that look like? What does it mean for you to have “*the word of the Lord ... speed ahead*” in your life? And if that really happened, how would your life look different? How would it change? If the Scriptures were living and active in your life, would that mean that you would stop hating your boss? Would that mean that you would stop lying to your spouse? Would that mean that you would stop yelling at your kids? And for the kids, would that mean that you would stop ignoring your parents? I don't know ... it may be any of that; it may be all of it. What I do know is that **if we really prayed** like this — “*that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored*” in my life, my life would start changing.

And it starts with prayer.

How about praying that “*we may be delivered from wicked and evil men?*” Got any wicked and evil men in your life? And I'm not talking about parents or teachers, or even pastors for that matter, because those people have been placed in authority over you by God. Yes, some of those people can be evil, but for most everyone here today, that's not the case. But where does evil come into your life?

Does evil come into your life through the media, through the TV, through the computer, through the movies you watch and the things you read? That may not be true for you ... but it is true for lots of people. And are you praying to be delivered from that evil?

Perhaps evil comes into your life through the people you associate with? Maybe it's that guy at work who can't speak without swearing? Maybe it's that friend at school who's trying to take advantage of you? Maybe it's that woman in the neighborhood who constantly talks bad about everyone else? That may not be true for you ... but it is true for lots of people. And are you praying to be delivered from that evil?

Pray for the word of God to be active in your life, and pray against the evil that's trying to get into your life. We can all be **concerned** about this, we can all **complain** about this, but Paul is trying to get us all to be **praying** about this.

And then we have to ask, Does knowing what we're **supposed** to be doing have any real effect on us? The Bible is full of commands. The letters of the Apostle Paul are full of commands. We know what they are. And even if we don't know what they are, we know where to find them. They're not hidden, they're right here in the Bible in plain sight.

Would Paul be able to say about us, "*And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.*"

Now the rubber hits the road. And there are so many commands, and it can seem to be so overwhelming at times, that I'm just going to briefly focus on just one verse ... **1 Thessalonians 5:11**, "***Therefore encourage one another and build one another up.***"

How you doing with that one? Who have you encouraged lately? Who have you built up? How have you done that? And of course, the opposite command always applies. If you're supposed to be encouraging one another, then you're not supposed to be **discouraging** one another. If you're supposed to be building one another up, then you're not supposed to be tearing one another **down**.

You know, it's always easier to focus on the positive command.

It's a lot easier to talk about encouragement ... not so easy to deal with tearing others down. Be honest, there's some building up going on in this church, but there's also some tearing down.

So how do we deal with that? Does just having me mention it make the problem go away? I doubt it. We have to go back to the same thing Paul did when he talked about their obedience. If we're going to become people who consistently encourage and build others up then our hearts need to be directed "*to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.*"

If we're going to be able to do any of this stuff, we have to know where to turn. And that means turning to ... and depending on the Lord.

But does **knowing** where to turn grow us as Christians? No. And Paul knows that. Because **knowing** that we need to turn to Christ ... and **actually** turning to Christ are two different things. There's a lot of things that I know I should do ... and I don't always do them. Some of them are simple ... and some of them are hard. A lot like the commands in the Bible.

And I tend to do the things that I know I can handle pretty well. I know there's certain tasks and skills I'm good at ... and so I do those. But there's some things I avoid because I'm not so good at doing those things. And then there's some things that I honestly don't know whether I can handle them or not ... and **those** are the **hardest** ones of them all. Because I know I can't do those things in my own strength, in my own wisdom, in my own ability. If those things are going to happen, it's going to have to be of God.

You know, I read something this week that was very simple, but really profound. It was simply this ... "If you can explain what's going on, **then God isn't doing it.**"

And I was struck by that because there's not a lot going on that I can't explain. Not in my life and not in my church. And then I get concerned because I want God to be involved in **your life way more** than I want Him to be involved in mine. I want to see God take **you** out of your comfort zone ... but I'll stay in my comfort zone, thank you very much.

I want to look at **your** life and say "Man, that's all of God."

But I'd like **my** life to be explainable, understandable, controllable, **easy**.

But that's not a good thing ... so things are going to have to change. But **you know**, my life is kind of linked pretty closely with the church ... which means ... that if my life is going to change ... and the church is going to be affected ... then your life is going to change too.

And to be fair, you need to know that the elders have been discussing change a lot lately. We've been talking about the next step for Potomac Hills ... and what that's going to look like ... and how much it's going to cost.

I've shared some of that last spring ... and if you missed it, the message is on the website. But we've decided that before we take any actions, we want to come out and talk to you. We want to hear where your life is too explainable and where your life has changed because you were depending on God and not yourself. We want to hear what, how, and where Potomac Hills is impacting your life ... and where it's not. We want to start a campaign to build one another up ... and to multiply the ministry of Potomac Hills.

But before we get too far down the road of plans and personnel, schedules and supplies, funding and future direction ... we want to listen to you. We want to hear what Potomac Hills is doing that's working in your life ... and what's **not** working in your life that Potomac Hills **needs** to be doing.

So we're going to set up a series of small group meetings, somewhere between six and ten meetings this fall, covering the whole church ... to listen to you ... and to share some of what we're thinking as well.

We think Potomac Hills is ready to do some new things and move in some new directions ... and we don't want it to be so easy to explain that God's not in it.

It will take a lot of prayer. It will take a lot of trusting God. It will take a lot of faithfulness to God's Word. And it will take a lot of "*directing our hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.*"

We think that there's a lot of exciting, scary, risky, trusting days ahead of us as a church. And at the end of it, we want to be saying, "There's no explaining it ... it was all of God ... and it was all of grace."

Stay tuned. You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

*Heavenly Father, we thank You for the church in Thessalonica. Thank You that they received and accepted the Word of God and so they prayed, and the loved and they depended on You. May we do the same. We ask that You would do this within each one of us ... in the Name of Your Son, Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.*

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### **Romans 15:30-33**

*I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers ... and that my service ... may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.*