

Message #5

Kurt Hedlund

2 Thessalonians

7/30/2017

THE HEALTHY CHURCH AND A PROPER PRAYER FOCUS

2 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5

I.

The movie "Dunkirk" has just appeared on the big screen. I have not seen it, but I have read reviews about it. The movie appears to be consistent with the history that forms the background to the story. The events that happened at Dunkirk had a crucial impact upon the course of WW II.

The German army blitzed through most of western Europe in the spring of 1940. Remnants of the armies of Britain and France and a few smaller European countries were squeezed into an area around the French coastal town of Dunkirk. (PROJECTOR ON--- DUNKIRK) Almost 400,000 Allied troops were trapped in this pocket. The situation looked bleak. The Allies had been unable to stop the advancing German army. They had been defeated and pushed back. Now it looked like they were going to be either slaughtered or forced into a mass surrender. But suddenly the Germans stopped. They shelled and bombed the Allies, but they did not advance upon their position. The Allied troops were able to escape to England.

Shortly after the evacuation a top British general remarked, **"I still cannot understand how it is that the Bosches have allowed us to get the B[ritish] E[xpeditionary] F[orce] off in this way. It is almost fantastic that we have been able to do it in the face of all the bombing and gunning."** Historians have debated ever since about why this happened.

On the occasion of the release of this movie Bloomberg News interviewed the senior historian at the World War II Museum in New Orleans. Dr. Robert Citino told the news outlet last week that there will never be a consensus among historians as to why the German military halted. He said, **"Both during and after the war, the Germans threw up so much chaff on this question that sorting it out is impossible."**

There is another side of the battle and evacuation at Dunkirk that is not usually mentioned in the history books. On May 23, 1940, numerous British political leaders, newspaper editors and King George VI issued a call for a national day of prayer to be held on Sunday, May 26. On the next day, May 24, Hitler approved a request from General von Rundstedt for a temporary halt to the German advance. On May 26 the people of the United Kingdom gathered to pray. Church attendance dramatically increased. A crowd gathered at Westminster Abbey and pleaded for God to be gracious to the husbands and sons

and fathers who were stranded at Dunkirk. Neville Chamberlain, who had been replaced as Prime Minister a few days earlier by Winston Churchill, wrote in his diary: "**May 26. Blackest day of all... This was the National Day of Prayer.**"

At 7 PM that evening an order was given to use every available boat and ship on the English coast to rescue the troops at Dunkirk. For the next several days the Germans seemed content to bomb and shell the fleeing soldiers. But the Panzers and the Wehrmacht did not advance. By June 1, 336,000 soldiers had been successfully evacuated from Dunkirk. British leaders were astounded at their good fortune. (PROJECTOR OFF)

God's Word says that prayer from God's people makes a difference. Prayer is also essential to a healthy church. In our study of the Thessalonian letters we have seen that Paul regarded the newly formed church at Thessalonica in Greece as a healthy church. Its display of faith and love and hope in the face of persecution gave evidence of that. In Chapter 2 of 2 Thessalonians we have seen that the Christians in Thessalonica had been fed some wrong information about end time events. So Paul gave them a clearer explanation about the return of Christ and events associated with that. In our passage today Paul turns to prayer. In these verses we learn something about the proper focus of prayer concerns for a healthy church.

II.

From v. 1 of 1 Thessalonians 3 we find that HEALTHY CHURCH PRAYER WILL FOCUS ON PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. HEALTHY CHURCH PRAYER WILL...) Paul says in v. 1, which is p. 990 in the black Bibles, "**Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored...**"

Paul's focus has been upon the Thessalonian Christians and the circumstances which they faced. Now he says something about himself and his coworkers. In the process he tells us something about what should be our prayer concern.

Paul was the most capable and talented Christian leader in the world in the first century. He had an excellent education. He had studied under Gamaliel, who was regarded by many Jews as the foremost rabbi in the world. Paul had already experienced great success as an evangelist. He was bold and courageous. He was multilingual. He enjoyed the privileges of Roman citizenship. He was well-traveled. He had much of the Hebrew Bible memorized, if not all of it. He had experienced personal revelation from Jesus Christ. He was self-disciplined. He had a clear strategy for what he wanted to accomplish. Yet he expresses a need for prayer.

Paul understood that any spiritual accomplishments that he experienced were ultimately the result of God's work in his life. Thus in Colossians #1 he spoke about his proclamation of the gospel of Christ. (COLOSSIANS 1:29) In v. 29 he writes, "**For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.**" He recognized his dependence upon Christ.

Thus it was that he often requested prayer for himself from fellow Christians. Back in v. 25 of #5 in 1 Thessalonians (1 THESSALONIANS 5:25) we saw him say simply, "**Brothers, pray for us.**" Keep in mind that when he wrote these words, the Christians there had been believers for perhaps only six months. But he wanted their prayers. One does not have to be a Christian for ten years before God will start listening to us. The prayers of even brand new Christians make a difference. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Paul was an accomplished Christian leader and an apostle of Christ, but he was involved in spiritual warfare. He was on the front lines of God's work. He was a church planter. So he recognized how important the prayers of God's people are. If he needed prayer, so do the rest of us, especially when we are involved in Christian ministry.

In the course of my involvement with churches and with missionaries I have found that most missionaries are diligent to send out letters or e-mails with prayer requests on a consistent basis. Occasionally, however, I have found some who seldom send out prayer requests. That always puzzles me. Do these people who are sent out by churches and individuals to promote the gospel, and are supported by them financially, not really realize their need for prayer? I appreciate our missions committee in that it has regarded communication of prayer requests as a priority in the missionaries and organizations that we support.

The specific object of prayer concern in v. 1 is the spread of the word of the Lord, which seems to primarily involve the gospel about Jesus Christ. Paul wants it to "speed ahead." The word literally means "to run swiftly." The apostle may have had in his mind the words of Psalm 147. (PROJECTOR ON--- PSALM 147:15) In that psalm the psalmist says, "**He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.**"

Paul seems to have read the sports pages of the newspaper back then. For he often makes comparisons to the Greek games. (PROJECTOR OFF) Here it seems like he is thinking of track athletes and their running events. At the end of the races the winners were honored with a wreath and often with financial rewards. In this case Paul wants the word of God to win and to be honored.

Earlier in his ministry he was with Barnabas in Antioch in Asia Minor, what we know today as Turkey. He was preaching about Jesus in the synagogue there. (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 13:48) According to Acts 13 v. 48, "**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." There is that reference to election, or predestination, again. But notice primarily that Gentiles were glorifying the word of the Lord. How were they doing that? Primarily by believing it, by trusting in Jesus as their Savior.

(PROJECTOR OFF) In the Acts account of the planting of the church at Thessalonica it is not clear that Paul and his fellow missionaries had a really good response to the proclamation of the gospel. But here in v. 1 of our passage it is evident that the gospel did speed ahead and was honored there. Such was not the case at other places where Paul preached. After Thessalonica Paul went to Berea. Some accepted the gospel there. But Paul was forced out of town. Athens was his next stop. Not many responded to the word of the Lord there. He was mocked in the marketplace. Now he was at Corinth. Some responded. But in his first letter to the Corinthians he says that many regarded his message as foolishness.

A healthy church wants to see God's word proclaimed. It wants to see the gospel accepted and honored. We are to pray accordingly. Thus we rejoice to see the baptisms that we had a couple of Sundays ago. Baptisms are a way of honoring of the word of the Lord.

Many around us have a ho-hum reaction to that gospel. It is often in our prison outreach that we see a better reaction. We saw hundreds of prisoners taking our Bible correspondence courses. I send manuscript copies of my sermons to five different inmates who have requested them. So we should continue to pray for our outreach to prisoners. A healthy church will make proclamation of the gospel a priority prayer concern.

III.

In vv. 2 & 3 we find that HEALTHY CHURCH PRAYER WILL also FOCUS ON DELIVERANCE FROM EVIL. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. HEALTHY CHURCH PRAYER WILL...) In v. 2 Paul continues his prayer: **"...and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith."**

Given Paul's concern for proclamation of the gospel and the nature of his ministry, it would seem likely that Paul has in mind opponents of the gospel. He was writing this letter from Corinth in southern Greece. He was there for about eighteen months. According to Acts #18 his greatest opposition there came from Jews who did not like his message. At one point they dragged Paul before the Roman governor. He did not buy the Jewish charges, and the Jews did not succeed in their attempt to do harm to Paul.

It is important to recognize that Paul is not praying here just for his own safety. He is not asking that God would keep him from all danger. His concern is that wicked and evil men would keep him from presentation of the gospel. In a similar vein Paul requested prayer from the Christians in Rome. In

Romans #15 vv. 30 & 31 (ROMANS 15:30) the apostle wrote this: **"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, (ROMANS 15:31) that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints..."** Paul was asking for prayers of deliverance from evil people so that he could continue his ministry.

Notice back in v. 2 of our passage that Paul adds the brief statement, **"For not all have faith."** (PROJECTOR OFF) This could be interpreted to mean that not all have the Christian faith, or not all have trusting faith. Perhaps the difference is not important. The bigger concern is the reason for the statement. It would seem to be obvious that unbelievers do not have faith, at least faith in Jesus. Perhaps Paul is making an additional warning about people who claim to be Christians, but who are not. Perhaps he has people in mind like the false teachers who tried to convince the Christians at Thessalonica that the day of the Lord had already come.

Fairly often in the New Testament Paul warned about such false teachers. One example of this is found in 2 Corinthians. Paul is defending his ministry and warning about false teachers. In #11 (PROJECTOR ON-- 2 CORINTHIANS 11:12), beginning in v. 12, Paul says, **"And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. (2 CORINTHIANS 11:13) For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. (2 CORINTHIANS 11:14) And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. (2 CORINTHIANS 11:15) So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds."**

So it is that we Christians always need to be discerning and wise about Christian leaders and pastors. There are some who use Christian language and who talk about the Bible and use Biblical terminology. Yet they do not believe in foundational Christian doctrines like the virgin birth of Christ, the literal resurrection, the miracles of Jesus and miracles in the Old Testament. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Then in v. 3 of our passage we read, **"But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one."** The last word in v. 2 is the Greek word for "faith." The first word in v. 3 in the original Greek text is "faith." So there is an intentional contrast between the faithlessness of certain unbelievers and the faithfulness of the Lord. "Lord" is the term that Paul uses for Jesus Christ.

There is also a switch in this verse from Paul's situation to that of the Thessalonian Christians. We might have expected Paul to say that he and his coworkers would be OK because of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. But he has turned his attention back to the Thessalonians. They are facing persecution. They can be assured that Christ will be faithful. Paul had already been imprisoned and beaten on several

occasions by those who opposed his message. He had been stoned and left for dead. But he was still going. The Lord had been faithful to him.

There are two aspects of the faithfulness of Christ that Paul has in mind. One assurance is that Christ will strengthen them. He will give internal fortitude and courage and perseverance to the Thessalonians. He has sent the Holy Spirit to indwell them, and He is certain to establish them.

Christ will also guard them against the evil one. This would seem to involve external, supernatural protection. He will arrange circumstances and cause things to happen around them to provide some kind of protection. In all of this Jesus is acting like a shepherd. Indeed he told his disciples (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 10:11), according to John #10 v. 11, **"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."** It is the job of the good shepherd to protect the sheep from all predators.

The object of protection is "the evil one." The original word could also be translated simply as "evil." Exactly the same word is used in the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation and protect us from evil--- or the evil one." In our context Paul has just been talking about the Antichrist and the devil who will empower him. In verse 9 of #2 Paul specifically mentioned Satan. So Paul may well have been speaking about Satan in particular, although the basic promise could also apply to protection from evil in general.

Many people in Thessalonica and some other Greek cities were part of a patronage system which involved wealthy businessmen and people who worked for them. The workers, or clients, were not always working for the businessman, or patron. It was a little bit like the situation we picture with mob families, only there was nothing illegal about the patronage system. But with mob families the popular perception is that there were people who hung around with the boss. When he needed help, they would show up. In turn the mob boss was supposed to provide protection and support for his underlings. The boss would throw money toward the underlings when they needed it.

Here Jesus might be pictured as the perfect patron. He protects His clients and cares for them. At the same time He expects His clients to be loyal to Him, to be faithful to Him. There is no guarantee that our Lord will keep us from dangerous situations, or from persecution. But he will protect us from being taken over, or done in, by the evil one.

So just as in the Lord's Prayer we should pray for protection from the evil one, so also in the healthy church we should pray for one another that we will be delivered from evil, and the evil one. We will all experience suffering and difficulties. Some Christians in some parts of the world will experience severe persecution. We should pray for one another in these situations that we will not be discouraged, that we will not give up hope, that we will not stop loving and that our faith will not waver.

IV.

Then, according to v. 4, HEALTHY CHURCH PRAYER WILL FOCUS ON OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WORD. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. HEALTHY CHURCH PRAYER WILL...) Paul writes, **"And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command."** Paul is not specifically praying in this verse. But he is indicating his concern, and we can be sure that he was praying for the Thessalonian Christians to do the right things in their situation.

His confidence here was primarily in the Lord. As we will see next week, not all of the Thessalonian Christians were doing the right thing. This statement was also a way of pressuring the Christians to do the right thing. Paul has just spoken about right beliefs and the need to have a proper understanding about end-time events. But behavior is also important.

As an apostle Paul was in a unique position to give commands. These commands were related to his knowledge of God's word and the revelation that he had specifically received from Christ. Our authority as preachers and teachers is related to that same word of God and revelation.

Shortly before Jesus ascended into heaven He spoke to His disciples and gave them what we know as the Great Commission. (MATTHEW 28:18) At the end of Matthew #28 we are told, **"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. (MATTHEW 28:19) Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, (MATTHEW 28:20) teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"** So whoever is communicating the commands of Jesus Christ--- whoever is accurately teaching the word of God--- carries the authority of Christ.

As people around us go through health challenges and relationship difficulties and persecution and financial problems (PROJECTOR OFF), we should pray for them to be obedient to God's word, whatever that might mean. We want them to do the right thing in all of the circumstances of life. This means praying that they will promote the gospel, that they will experience protection from evil and that they will obey God's word.

V.

According to v. 5, HEALTHY CHURCH PRAYER WILL also FOCUS ON GOD'S LOVE AND CHRIST'S STEADFASTNESS. (PROJECTOR ON--- V. HEALTHY CHURCH PRAYER WILL...) Paul expresses a kind of prayer, saying, **"May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ."**

Most prayers in the New Testament are directed toward God the Father. Indeed in the Lord's Prayer Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven..." But occasionally, as here, we see prayers addressed to the Lord Jesus Christ. Another example occurs in Acts #7. Stephen is brought before the religious leaders in Jerusalem. After listening to His message about Jesus the Sanhedrin condemns him to death. (ACTS 7:59) Beginning in v. 59 we read, **"And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' (ACTS 7:60) And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice. 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep."**

In our verse the prayer is that the Lord Jesus might direct the hearts of the Thessalonian Christians. The heart is regarded as the human center of thinking and willing. It is the control center of us human beings. (PROJECTOR OFF) Paul wants the hearts of Christians to be focused on the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ.

The interpretive question here is this: Is Paul talking about our love for God and our steadfastness toward Jesus Christ, or is he talking about God's love for us and Christ's steadfastness toward us. Both are possible. Most interpreters think that the stress is upon God's love for us and Christ's display of steadfastness toward us. Back in #2 in v. 16 Paul spoke of God's love for Christians. Just before that he said that God chose Christians. So it would seem likely that Paul is saying that he wants his readers to focus on God's love for Christians and Christ's steadfastness toward us.

Then also Paul has been talking about the certainty of Christ's promise to return. He will rescue His people and deal out retribution to the bad guys. Christians should persevere--- they should remain steadfast--- because Christ is steadfast toward us. He will keep His promises. Glory awaits us.

Our focus on God's love for His people and Christ's steadfastness toward Christians should be a motivation for Christians to do what is right, to persevere in the face of persecution. The Thessalonian Christians should continue to display the Christian virtues that have made them a healthy church. They should obey the directions that Paul is about to give them in the next section.

Healthy church prayer will focus on proclamation of the gospel. It will focus on deliverance from evil. It will focus on obedience to God's word. It will focus on God's love and Christ's steadfastness.

Carl Moeller is the head of Open Doors USA, which is dedicated to the support of persecuted Christians around the world. He writes, **"As I travel where Christians are persecuted, among the most striking areas of contrast with the Western church is prayer. This essential spiritual discipline is refined in the crucible of suffering."**

"When things go wrong in the West, some Christians turn for help to the government, MasterCard or their insurance company. Western Christians can often solve their own problems through wealth and power. But that's not an option for the persecuted Christian minority in the world's most restrictive places. Believers there lack the means to help themselves any other way than by extending desperate pleas to God through prayer. When they cry to God, they discover He is enough.

"The underground church prays for things Western Christians would never think to pray for, such as the strength to never deny Christ under torture or to be blessed to possess a Bible. In keeping with Jesus' command in Matthew 5:44-45, the church prays for those who persecute.

"Throughout the persecuted church around the world, prayer is the fundamental basis of life. An Iraqi refugee in Amman Jordan, told me, 'Our prayers are always before God--- for security, dignity and those who persecute us.' These suffering saints are confident that through prayer they can carry their persecutors before the Throne of Grace. They know the Lord can transform them.

".... Historically, Americans have generously shared their material blessings and used their capacity for good to bring about change. But too many churches have forgotten how to live lives of faith, hope and prayer." May that not be true of us.