

*May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, <sup>17</sup> encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. <sup>3:1</sup> Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. <sup>2</sup> And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. <sup>3</sup> But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. <sup>4</sup> We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. <sup>5</sup> May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance. (2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5)*

### **The Lord is Faithful**

A couple of weeks ago, my daughter gave me a book for Father's Day. Because she gave it to *me*, it was a history book. While I was reading it, she asked me how I liked it. I told her that it was well written, but I didn't like how it was going to end. You see, it was about the fall of Constantinople to the Turks. That Christian city fell to Islamic invaders and I can't help but root for the Christians. Throughout the siege, the Christians kept praying to God for rescue. But rescue never came. In fact, several times when the Christian forces temporarily gained the upper hand, some accident or some moment of selfishness or stupidity on their part would cause them to lose it. They could have beaten the siege if a couple of things had gone differently. But they lost in the end.

Did God hear their prayers? Did he keep his promises to protect his people? That's the connection that I see with the word of God that we have before us this morning. God has called me to be your pastor. That means that I've sat next to many of you in the hospital or at a funeral home, I've prayed with you and tried to comfort you as you struggled with what was happening in your life. Over the years, I counseled with Christians who were struggling against sins that they fell into again and again, and of course, I have my own personal struggles with sin and weakness. Sometimes, it just feels like God isn't there. What do we make of our lives when all that is going on? Today, St. Paul reminds us of a truth that we need to cling to in a sinful world, especially when it's hard for us to see: **the Lord is faithful.**

#### **I.**

Now, this portion of scripture does not directly raise all those questions. It just assumes we know what life is like in a sinful world. What it does is repeat one promise after another. And it begins and ends with the promise that God will give us strength. Day by day, as we struggle with what God does and what God allows into our lives, we need to remember that promise. **The Lord is faithful. He strengthens us.**

St. Paul says, **"May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word."** This is really a prayer that Paul was offering for his fellow Christians in Thessalonica and it's a prayer that every pastor offers for his members, even if he doesn't use these words. And we offer prayers like this for you because these blessings can only come from God. Paul asks God to encourage the hearts of his people and to strengthen them in every good deed and word.

I can't say enough about how important it is to encourage the hearts of God's people. I often feel that that's the primary reason why I visit with you. What do I use to encourage your hearts? The same thing that I use to strengthen you to live for Christ. I talk about how God has loved us and by his grace has given us eternal encouragement and good hope. In other words, I talk about the gospel. I talk about Jesus and what his work means for your life. The God who loved us so much that he sent his Son to live and then die and then rise from the dead for us, the God who shattered the law of nature that says that dead people stay dead forever, the God who found a way to fulfill the law for us sinners so that he could call us holy and perfect in his courtroom and give us eternal life, the God who is going to return and raise our bodies and give us perfect joy forever, that God is never going to leave us or forsake us. He knows what's going on in your life right now. If he allows pain or hardship or temptation to come into your life today, he's doing it because that is what's best for you today. He will carry you through the current crisis. He will give you strength to face it. He will answer your prayers, and here or in heaven, he will take away the hurt.

That message encourages our hearts when we hurt. It strengthens us to live and to speak as children of God. And it's funny, when I say things like that to you, quite often, whichever of you I'm talking to at that moment will say, "I know, pastor." I tell you God will never leave you and you say, "I know." I tell you that he loves you and works all things for your good and you say, "I know." I tell you that Jesus will bring you home to heaven where all hurt and sorrow cease and you say, "I know." So I often find myself saying, "I know that you know. I haven't said anything new to you today. But I'm your pastor and sometimes, it's my job to tell you things you already know because we need to hear them again when life hurts." Almost always, you nod in agreement because, as people of faith, you understand that's true.

But what about when it feels like sin is winning? Sadly, I've had experiences of trying to offer that comfort to people and having them throw it back in my face. I myself have struggled with personal challenges and hurts and with temptation and sins that get under my skin and I've felt like all those words weren't changing anything. There are people that I visit who have struggled for years with illness and pain or with the unfaithfulness of their children or with their own sinful weakness and failures and they have prayed, over and over again for God's mercy, but they don't see it. The illness and the pain go on for year after weary year, the children show no more sign of repentance than they did before, that Christian falls into that same sin again. Where are God's promises then?

That is when it is most important to understand that a promise is something that is still coming. Hope is looking forward to something you can't see yet. Faith is trusting in God even when all the evidence says that he's not there or he doesn't care or he can't help. We live in a sinful world. God never promised us that we wouldn't have pain here. God never promised us that we would reach a moment when we never sinned again or that our children wouldn't struggle with the same flesh that we do. God promised us that he will give us strength to face it all. He will encourage our hearts when life hurts. That doesn't mean the pain will stop. It means that he will be with us to deal with it. God promised that he will give us hope. He will give us an expectation that in his time, he will resolve all our problems. Either here or in heaven, they will disappear and we will be healed. He gives us assurance that Christ died even for those sins that we keep falling into and day by day, he calls us to forget yesterday's failings and commit ourselves to serving him today.

On this side of heaven, we will never see a perfect world. We will never have a perfect heart or a perfect life. We will never be free of pain or sorrow, so sometimes it will feel like God isn't keeping his promises. It would take a miracle to overcome that feeling. But God built the power of the Holy Spirit into those promises and he works that miracle in them: he does encourage our hearts and strengthen our faith. He calls pastors to come to you with that gospel and build you up – not to say new things or come up with clever psychological insights to make you feel better, but to apply Christ to you personally, in your struggle, in your hurt, in your sin. In truth, God allows that hurt and the struggle and even that sin to come so that he can send the gospel to heal and build up and encourage and strengthen you. Trust in him. Lean on him. He will get you through all the trials of this life. He will bring you home to heaven.

## II.

Paul says, **"We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command."** He had confidence in his members because they were people of faith. But above all, he trusted in God to work in their lives and give them the strength to speak and to live as his people. He trusted one more promise that God gives: to protect those Christians from all the forces of evil and unbelief and to bring them home to heaven. Let's also trust that promise. **The Lord is faithful. He protects us.**

Paul asked the church in Thessalonica, **"Pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you."** I once met a woman who said to me, "Some people forget to pray for their pastor." She went on to say that she always prayed for her pastor while he was preaching. She kept asking God to help him. At the time, I didn't really know what to say to that. Yet, the comment has stayed with me for more than twenty years. Pray for us. Here at Peace, God has sent you a pastor and a staff of teachers and God has called members to teach Sunday school and serve on various boards and committees. We all have different gifts and abilities. But pray for us all. Pray that God would use us to proclaim the gospel. Pray that through the ministry here the message about Christ would be spread. And pray for our work at HVL, at all our synod schools, at our missions in the US and around the world.

Paul continues, **"And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith."** Sometimes, unbelievers try to stop us from doing the work God has called us to do. Pray for

pastors and teachers and missionaries everywhere that God would protect them from the assaults of unbelievers. Of course, not all of those assaults are physical. But the lies and the gossip, the mockery and the insults can do just as much damage. Only the Lord can protect us. Paul calls you to pray that he does because of God's promise.

He says, **“But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.”** It isn't just us ministers who are in danger. You are too. The real enemy is the devil. He orchestrates all the attacks against us. He wants my ministry to fail because he wants your faith to die. But the devil is not in control. God is. He promises that no matter how hard life gets, no matter how clever the devil's attacks may be, no matter how hurtful the sin of the world around is or how weak we feel, God will protect us from the evil one. He will keep our faith alive until we get home.

God is faithful. He will answer all those prayers that our pastors and teachers and missionaries are kept safe from the world and that they boldly proclaim the good news. And even when it looks the devil is winning, when a missionary is killed or driven out, when a member is attacked, when unbelievers overrun Christian cities and societies, even then the promises of God will not fail. His gospel will still reach into our hearts and claim us. He will still bring us home. When we get there, we're not going to think about the battle scars. We're not going to be filled with regrets over how poorly we served. In heaven, we are only going to rejoice that the gospel won. We will see what we can't see now and understand God's plan and rejoice forever.

When I was vicar, a friend of mine at the seminary called me and asked me to visit his grandfather who was dying in the hospital in the city where I was serving. He warned me that his grandfather was an unbeliever who had abandoned his mother when she was a little girl and led a sinful life. Well, to make a long story short, I visited his grandfather and shared the gospel with him and baptized him in his hospital bed. He lived for a couple of months and then died. My friend called me again the night he died and asked if I would come and see him and his mom at the hospital. I told them that God's timing was perfect. He rescued that sinful man from a life of sin and gave him real and heartfelt repentance and he died clinging to Jesus. My friend told me later that he went home that night celebrating God's win over the devil. In a world where it often looks like the devil is winning, we don't know how God plans to accomplish his purposes. We know only that Christ has washed all our sins away. He promises to love us and care for us and bring us home. He promises to send that message throughout all the world and to work through it. He promises to encourage our hearts and give us strength through that message. He is faithful. He will keep those promises. Amen.