

O wondrous love, to lead and guide, to bear the cross and chain.

That guilty sinner, such a side, might plead Thy gracious name.

I'm going to hand over and I take rest of my peace to take rest of the service. Thank you. Would you turn, please, to Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, and to chapter three, the beginning of chapter three.

[16:25] This morning, we considered the beginning, the opening of this short, not so well-known letter, written, one of those two letters written by the apostle to this young little church in Thessalonica, and I'm going to read from chapter three, verses one to five.

So let us hear God's word. Finally, brothers, pray for us that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not all have faith, but the Lord is faithful.

He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you that you are doing and will do the things that we command.

May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Christ. So before I preach this passage, we're going to sing a hymn of praise, number 122. The words will be on the screen.

[17:51] And it's a prayer that God the Holy Spirit will be working in our hearts as we hear and heed God's word. 1-2-2.

1-2-2. On holy Oskar's heart stings fly
Let us thy influence prove
So stop the old prophetic fire
And day of life and love
Come holy God for rule by thee
The prophets wrote and spore the truth
Thy spell the key
Until the sing the moon

Expand thy wings
Celestial Dove
Through Lord our nature's night
On earth is soren still its moon
And let there now be light
God through himself we then shall know
If thou within us shine
And sun with all thy saints below
the depths of love divine!

So let us pray God our Father we claim that promise that the entrance of your word brings light and we pray that as your Holy Spirit works in me as I preach in each of us as we hear your word that your word would indeed enter into our hearts and minds to quieten our consciences to stir us to trust and fresh faith and obedience and to work in us something afresh of your joy and we ask it for Jesus sake Amen I mentioned this morning that I preached through this short letter in our church in Cambridge where Carolyn and I live in Cambridge Presbyterian Church and it certainly did me good whether it did the rest of the church good I have no idea but it did me good and when I was preaching this passage at the beginning of chapter three I was surprised it helped me to see one of the paradoxes of the Christian faith and I wasn't really expecting this it's this in normal life when you meet hostility or difficulties it's often a time for retrenchment if a strong enemy attacks you in a battle you pull back you dig the trenches you put up the barricades you shelter in the bunkers you wait until the onslaught has passed if you're sailing on the minch and a storm brews up you drop anchor if you can you batten down the hatches you wait out the storm that's what you do in normal life so what are

[22:18] Christians to do and Christian churches when there is opposition when persecution comes when there's hostility or when as for us the prevailing culture turns against Christian faith when those growing up through school or college or university they find themselves in a small minority perhaps as those who seek to be followers of Jesus what do we do and the surprising answer at least it seemed surprising to me is this they press on with the work of the gospel they expect to make progress they push ahead and they take new initiatives I've been really challenged and cheered by this so let's have a look at this passage and I think it may help us I mentioned this morning that this little church this young church in Thessalonica well I say little we don't know how many they were but it's very young church in

Thessalonica that they faced hostility it's very clear at the beginning of the first letter he says in chapter one you received the word in much affliction you see that in Acts chapter 17 when Paul and Silas came to that city with the gospel of the Lord Jesus and you get it again in this in second letter chapter two verse four all your persecutions the afflictions you're enduring it's really hard for them they're in the midst of a hostile sceptical culture it's a difficult place to be and the apostle has lifted their sights in the second letter as he does in the first to the return of the Lord Jesus in glory he's painted for them a wonderful picture of the God and the previous passage at the end of chapter two closes with this wonderful prayer that I used as a benediction this morning and I'll use again this evening now may our

Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our father who loved us and so on chapter two verses 16 and 17 and it's almost as though you get to the end of chapter two and you think well that's a great place to stop Paul he sometimes feels like an airplane that's coming down to land on the runway and you think he's about to land and then he takes off again and so chapter three verse one finally which means I've got a bit more to say letter writers sometimes do that Paul isn't the only one but this is what he's going to do here and we've got this evening a wonderful wonderful passage goes to and fro between speaking about himself and speaking about them so he says pray for us verse one that the Lord may speed ahead and be honored as happened among you then verse two that we Paul and his co-workers may be delivered from wicked and evil men for not all have faith but verse three the Lord is faithful he'll establish you guard you verse four we've got confidence in the Lord about you may the Lord direct your hearts and so on so sometimes he's talking about himself and his fellow workers sometimes he's talking about them but two things that run through these verses are prayer and assurance and I'm going to look at this under three headings but in each of them there's an indication of something to pray and an assurance that praying that something is according to the word of God and therefore we may be confident that God will answer that prayer if you want three words just to sum these up they're progress protection and perseverance just if you'd like to sort of hang these things on those three words so first of all progress and each of them gives us an indication of what to pray for in our gatherings for prayer in our gatherings on the Lord's day in our prayers with husbands or wives or prayers with others with whom we pray what to pray for and the first is this we are to pray for the progress of the gospel and we're to expect to see the progress of the gospel so verse one finally brothers that is the Christians in Thessalonica men women children pray for us pray for Paul and Silas and Timothy as they went round the Mediterranean world the known civilized world the Greco-Roman world pray for us that the word of the Lord that is the message that Jesus is Lord and the message that comes from Jesus the Lord with his authority that the word of the Lord the gospel that Jesus is Lord and Savior pray for us that the word of the Lord may speed ahead literally may run and it's a vivid positive picture pray that the word of the

[27 : 40] Lord may may not just not just go slowly or hobble I used to go running but earlier this summer I had a herniated disc and I haven't been able to run for a while so all I can do now is hobble and pray that the word of the Lord Jesus will not be like that that the word of the Lord Jesus will run and be honoured so things are tough there's lots of opposition not just in Thessalonica you read the Acts of the Apostles you find in every place that Paul and his fellow workers went to there was opposition there were some encouragements but again and again and again the story is we went there we preached Jesus Christ as Lord and maybe some good things happened but then there was opposition and it was hard that's the story so what does Paul say pray that I'll be patient as I batten down the hatches and stop telling people about Jesus not at all he says pray for us that the word of the Lord will be honoured will run and be honoured we sang part of

Psalms 147 and later in that Psalm we sing that his word runs swiftly speaking about his word in creation but God's word is a wonderful thing he spoke at creation and the universe came into being he spoke to Abraham and the family of God became a covenant family he spoke through Moses and the old covenant church became a people he spoke in Jesus Christ and the new creation began the word of God runs because it comes from the God who is sovereign and true and pray he says not just for the run of the gospel but for its reception pray that it will be honoured pray that it will be honoured and glorified treated as weighty and wonderful and true and we read in Acts chapter 13 in Pisidian Antioch that people glorified the word of God that they heard the word of God they heard the message of Jesus Christ they said wow that's marvellous and they glorified that word they said that's just what we need to hear that's true now of course that's not always or automatically what we see every one of us here will have had that experience of trying perhaps falteringly to share something of the gospel of Jesus perhaps with an unbelieving family member or with a work colleague or with a neighbour and they don't all immediately say wow that's marvellous thank you for telling me that

I'm so glad I'm going to trust in Jesus sometimes people do but often it's well I'm glad your faith works for you but I'm not interested for me or sometimes just plain hostility a friend of mine told me just a few weeks ago how he'd said to his elderly frail father who was facing a cancer that was going to kill him and he said to his father he'd spoken to his father before about the things of Christ and he said to him again he said dad we need to you and I need to talk about death and what

happens after death and his father said to him Matt we are never going to have that conversation do not speak to me about these things but the bible says we're to pray for the word of the lord to run ahead and be honoured I'll come back to that story in just a moment and what we pray for says so much about our hearts he and I pray for lots of things but it's been said hasn't it that what a man or a woman or a child is on his knees before

God that he is when we're on our knees as it were before God that's who we truly are and we pray for many things we pray for our families we pray for our sicknesses we pray for the sicknesses of others we pray that God would have mercy that we'd be better we pray for energy we pray for our busyness we pray for our low spirits we pray for our safety there are all sorts of things we pray for and it's right that we do because we have a heavenly father who knows what we need before we ask and he loves us to pray but you and I must beware of always praying this world only prayers and to pray for the run of a gospel is praying that the message of eternity will run and be honoured and Paul says pray for that and then he says wonderfully at the end it's the end of verse one pray that it will be speed ahead and be honoured as happened among you so you object to the apostle and you want to you want to put your hand up and say

Paul what you're saying about praying for the gospel to run and be honoured it's just unrealistic you have no idea what it's like in Thessalonica it's just not possible you have no idea what it's like on Harris in Cambridge you have no idea how difficult it is and Paul says just remember Silas and I were there for just three Sabbath days in terms of church planting that's quite a short time somewhere between 15 days and just under three weeks it's not a long time to plant a church we were there for three Sabbath days and we were bitterly opposed but what happened Acts chapter 17 verse 4 some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas as did a great many of the devout Greeks that is the non-Jews and not a few of the leading women isn't that extraordinary just those three days lots of people hostile especially the unbelieving

[33 : 54] Jews but a number a great many of the devout you know the God-fearing Gentiles and not a few of the leading women of whom there were in that world significant women with financial resources and seniority and so on and not a few of them you know it happened among you and you and I need to have our eyes open I certainly need to have my eyes opened to the fact to the fact that God has not stopped doing that my friend's father later said to him before he died he said please tell me about your Jesus and wonderfully he put his trust in Jesus before he died and we should pray for that that the word of God will run and be honoured and we read the New Testament we learn church history we might add not just as happened among you in Thessalonica but as happened here and there as happened on Lewis and Harris as happened in many different parts of the world all over the world

God has been doing this and we are to pray for this a friend emailed us last month to tell us of a woman whose husband was not a believer and she prayed for him for 50 years and then their son-in-law led him to Christ isn't that wonderful we need to hear these stories and to remember that God does this I remember one of my Bible students in London he'd been born in Afghanistan and raised in Iran and I interviewed him in front of the other students at the Bible training course that we were working with and I said tell us where you came to faith and he said at university in Tehran and I I hadn't heard that part of his story I said that's that's extraordinary and he said it's happening a lot doesn't get into our media pray that the word of God will run and be honoured I don't know if you've seen the publicity the while back I think it was earlier this year or last year the Bible Society did some kind of a poll and they called the results a quiet revival I don't know if that's an appropriate name but it certainly showed a significant uptick in church attendance in the last decade or so particularly amongst young men now I don't know if that's all absolutely genuine and all good it may or may not be these things are hard to to interpret but just supposing it is just supposing it's true you hear anecdotes about that a pastor friend of mine in London was saying they've had more sort of random people coming to church and coming to faith out of nowhere just appearing in the last year than they've had for the rest of his significant ministry before that so it's a remarkable thing and we but we're to pray for this and if I may say this as you know we're all getting older and some of you are my age or above the older we get we can still do this there are lots of things we can't do lots of things that we cease to be able to do but you can go on praying for the word of God to run and to be honoured we don't know how God will answer we don't know when God will answer but we know he will answer because the

Bible tells us to pray this and when the apostle says as happened among you it's just that encouragement this is what God does all over the world so there's the first thing pray for the progress of the gospel expect to see the gospel progress but here's the second and this is verses 2 3 and 4 pray for the progress of the gospel but second pray for the protection of Christ's church pray for the protection of Christ's church and expect to see Christ's church protected so the apostle goes on in verse 2 pray that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured and then he says and pray that we Paul and Silas and his missionary team may be delivered may be kept safe from wicked and evil men for not all have faith you might like to think that that's something of an understatement they're not all have faith and they knew from

Paul's visit to Thessalonica that the word of the Lord has many enemies and he says pray for those who speak the gospel to be delivered in Psalm 140 King David prays deliver me oh Lord from evil men John the Baptist's father sang about this Luke chapter 1 that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear Paul asks the church in Rome to pray the same that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea Romans chapter 15 later he'll he'll tell Timothy in his second letter to Timothy how he was rescued from persecutions at Antioch at Iconium and at Lystra in words that echo Psalm 22 he speaks about being rescued from the lion's mouth and he says the Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom we're to pray for this we're to pray for the protection of Christ's church and Christian people wonderfully in Peter's second letter he's speaking about

[39 : 36] Lot in Sodom and if you think our culture is a hostile place to godliness and the gospel Sodom and Gomorrah were worse it was a hard place to live and Lot for all his mistakes was described by Peter as a righteous man he's a believer in the one true covenant God and as Peter reminds them of the story and what God did to get Lot out of there before the judgment before the destruction he says the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials it's worth remembering that if you're thinking here is somebody I'm praying for here am I in trials and it just feels too hard I'm not sure God can rescue me out of this trial just think of Lot in Sodom and if you seriously think that the trial and danger that you're facing is worse than

Lot in Sodom perhaps come and have a word with me afterwards because I don't believe you so when Peter says the Lord he knows how to deliver the godly from trials he's saying he really does the god who could rescue Lot from Sodom really does do this and those who take the gospel to different cultures they need to pray for them and you will know as a number of you I'm sure will get prayer letters from mission partners endless endless prayers for visas It crops up again and again in cross-cultural mission prayer letters pray for the word of God to run pray for the visas to be granted I think of friends in Moldova I think of a reformed pastor who was a student of mine a friend he was visiting a Russian friendly republic for a mission he'd fled from Belarus! and is leading a Russian speaking reformed church in Poland and he visited a Russian friendly state and was nervous he was asking us to pray not only that he'd get in but that he'd get out because the Belarusian government would have loved to get hold of him one way or another pray for his protection the stories could go on and on and on and in our country too pray we don't need to pray for visas because we I guess looking around we're citizens we don't need visas we don't need protection from physical persecution at least not at the moment but we need protection from the seductive power of our culture we need protection because almost more dangerous than persecution is what Paul calls wicked and evil men and it's the seduction that lures somebody perhaps they've been brought up in a Christian home they've seen the gospel of Jesus at work they've seen godliness but culture says to them if you're going to get on in the world you need to leave that Jesus thing behind but Paul says the Lord is faithful he will establish you and guard you against the evil one so you can pray for them as you pray for yourself deliver us from evil as we pray in the Lord's Prayer pray for an outward looking church but pray for the protection of the church pray for the protection of Christ's church against in your face persecution but pray for the protection of the church against the seductive power of our culture to lure people away from Christ pray for the protection of Christ's church and the apostle goes on we have confidence in the Lord about you that you are doing will do the things that we command we don't have confidence that you've got the power to keep yourself safe but we have confidence in the Lord about you that the Lord will do that and as we pray for the protection of Christ's church we have not just the authority of the apostle Paul but of the Lord Jesus in John 17 he asks the Father

Holy Father keep them in your name I don't ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one guard them and if the Lord Jesus prayed that you and I may pray that in his name so pray for the progress of the gospel pray for the progress of the gospel here in Harris and Lewis pray for the progress of the gospel in Scotland pray for the progress of the gospel those you know who are Christians in other parts of the world and pray for the protection of Christ's church but in each case expect that your prayer will be answered expect that the gospel will make progress maybe not in exactly the time that you hope maybe not in exactly the way that you hope but that prayer will be answered and pray for the protection of Christ's church and he will now lastly and most wonderful of all progress protection perseverance and this is verse 5 pray that you will persevere like Christ and expect that you will persevere like Christ just as the end of chapter 2 chapter 2 closes with a wonderful prayer so this passage closes with a wonderful prayer may the Lord that is the Lord

Jesus direct your hearts to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ direct your hearts you cannot direct your heart you know that don't you you can you can do your best to live a godly life you can do your best to guard your tongue you can do your best to be careful what you post on social media you can do your best to behave in a in a godly way but if you say to yourself this week I'm really going to want to do the right thing you can't do it you can't do it you and I do not have the power to direct our hearts I can resolve to do the right thing and that's a good thing to do but I can't direct my heart I can say it would be wonderful wouldn't it if this week my heart really wants to do the right thing but I can't do it

[46 : 27] I don't have that power so we pray may the lord direct your hearts may the lord do that work in you by his spirit that will shape your will channel your desires guide your thoughts and he says he says I'm praying that the lord will direct your hearts to two things first of all to the love of god and it's possible sometimes that can mean so that you love god but usually nearly always in the apostle paul and often in the bible the love of god means not so much you or me loving god but the love that god shows for us and i'm pretty certain that's the main meaning here so may the lord direct your hearts to the love that god has for you means something like this may the lord direct your heart so that deep in your heart you will know that god loves you this is the work of the holy spirit god the holy spirit in romans chapter 5 he pours the love of god into your hearts so that you know that god loves you so the governing thought the controlling affection the thing that controls the turmoil of your emotions is this god loves me and the apostle speaks much of this in the letter in chapter 2 verse 13 brothers beloved by the lord chapter 2 verse 16 our lord jesus christ himself and god the father who loved us and this is really really fundamental each of each of us if you profess to follow christ if somebody says to you does god love you you know the right answer to give we all know the right answer to give it's not intellectually a difficult question yes i know that god loves me but the question is am i really convinced that god loves me is a different thing a friend of mine was being asked he was being interviewed he's been a pastor now for many years and he was being interviewed to go have a place in a seminary and the interviewer asked him rico do you love god good question interesting question for an interviewer to ask for a seminary do you love god and he said i don't know but i know that he loves me is that a great answer i don't really know if i love god i hope i love god but i know that he loves me so may the lord direct your hearts to the love of god so that you know god loves you i remember at a time when i was going through a dark time of i suppose you probably call it some kind of a breakdown but um 13 years ago um the words that jesus spoke to the disciples in john chapter 16 where he said to them at one point the father himself loves you and i remember how precious those few words were to me when my heart felt numb and my emotions were numb and i was just going through a dark time and i used to you'd have seen me walking along borough high street in the middle of london near where i worked and saying to myself christopher the father himself loves you and it's a great thing if you know that god the father loves you that god the son loves you that god the holy spirit pours that love into your hearts that that love is from all eternity that that love has been unwavering that nothing god has ever done to you or in your life has deviated from his

love that's a wonderful thing now this church in thessalonica may the lord direct your hearts to the love of god and then he says and to the steadfastness of christ the steadfastness of christ and again this probably means not being steadfast in looking to christ or waiting for christ that's a good thing to do but almost certainly it means the steadfastness that christ showed in the days of his flesh on earth and it's a remarkable thing if you think of the apostle paul and silas and timothy

persevering behind back of that is the lord jesus who persevered as the letter to the hebrews says he endured such hostility from sinners against himself the perseverance of jesus is one of the wonders of the world that wonderful verse in luke chapter nine where the where luke says the lord jesus set his face to go up to jerusalem he knew what awaited him there he knew he was going to be tried and falsely accused and condemned and mocked and spat upon and crucified and he set his face and he persevered and he was steadfast it's an astonishing thing that he did that but here's the connection really interesting thought this why did jesus persevere isn't part of the answer that he knew deep in his heart in every fiber of his being that the father loved him that god the holy spirit had worked in jesus in the days of his flesh had directed his heart so that he knew that god that his father loved him and because he knew deeply that his father loved him so he persevered and may the lord direct your heart to the love that god has for you and to the perseverance of christ it's a wonderful wonderful prayer you and i cannot do that if you go away from this evening saying right that's it i know what i've got to do i'm going to um i'm going to know that god loves me and i'm going to persevere you can't do it you'll fail you're bound to fail and so am i but the lord jesus did it and he takes us with him so that we do when i preached through this little letter this summer in our home church i i said actually that i'd never preached it before and then i was clearing out my study trying to reduce the amount of clutter that my children will have to sort out when i die um which is a practice i commend to those of us of later years um clear things out i was clearing out some some files and i discovered that i had preached this passage and i discovered that i preached it about 26 years ago and that it was in a service in which we had baptized the infant daughter of some very dear friends of ours and we prayed for this baby girl that she would be delivered from evil and i said if my sermon notes are to be believed i said she's sweet and lovely and a delight but she's not innocent and we trust and pray that as she grows she will prove a disciple of christ that the evil one will try every trick in his book to take her off the path to make her believe it's too tough to persuade her that moral compromise is harmless to discourage her so that she gives up and i encouraged the church it

was the church where i was then the pastor to pray for her and it's a wonderful thing 26 years later that prayer has is being answered she's still sweet and lovely and she's trusting jesus day by day she's 26 she's had her challenges no doubt she will have more challenges but it's a wonderful encouragement that when we pray that god will direct your hearts to the love that god has for you and the steadfastness of christ you can pray that confident that god will answer that prayer some of you will know the the doctrine we call the perseverance of the saints which is the doctrine that every true disciple of jesus will persevere to the end because god promises that perhaps tripping stumbling on the way maybe even with a period of backsliding all sorts of difficulties but in the end we will be there as jesus promises for each of his sheep i give them eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand and because god promises this we're to pray for it i remember a friend writing this prayer on the bottom of a letter when i was finding things tough may the lord direct your heart to the love of god and to the steadfastness of christ my friends are we not are you not encouraged by these words these this short passage let us pray for the progress of the gospel as you look ahead at the beginning of a school and college year pray in a culture where things are against us by and large pray that the word of the lord will rise and be honored pray there will be gospel progress we don't know how or when that will be answered but it will be answered pray for the protection of christ's church and expect christ's church to be protected and pray for the perseverance of all who are christ's and expect that we will persevere because this is the promise of god it's a great thing we pray many things for which we don't know whether it's god's will you suffer from some sickness someone dear to you suffers from a sickness you pray that god will have mercy and that they'll be cured or healed good thing to pray for we don't know whether that is god's will or not but when you pray for the run of the gospel you're praying according to god's revealed will when you pray for the protection of christ's church you're praying according to god's revealed will when you pray for the perseverance of the saints and your own perseverance you're praying in accordance with god's revealed will so pray those prayers but pray them with joy and confidence amen our closing hymn is so number 126 in mission praise facing a task unfinished it's a great missionary prayer hymn to encourage us in that work of the gospel of jesus so let's sing facing a task unfinished that drives us to our

knees and he glad and diminished renew such not for ease we who rejoice to know thee renew before thy throne the solemn pletrily o'er thee to go and make thee known where other lords beside thee hold their unhindered sway where forces are defy thee defy thee still today with none to heed

their crying for life and love and light unnumbered souls are dying and passing to the night we bear the torch and flaming fell from the hands of those who gave their lives for craving that Jesus died and rose and is the same commission the same our message ours I buy the same ambition!

[60 : 27] to thee we give thou power! O Father who sustain them O Spirit who inspire Savior who's not constrained them to talk with seal and tire from cowardice defend us from leperity away forth on thy heavens send us to labor for thy sake so brothers and sisters again hear the benediction the blessing of God I'm going to use again the words that the apostle uses in this letter now may our Lord

Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word Amen