

Love and Steadfastness • 2 Thessalonians 3:5

Consultants and counselors often have a favorite question that helps to focus the thinking of those with whom they are dealing. That question is, “How would you like things to be?” It’s a question that is rooted in dissatisfaction. It assumes that people don’t like the way things are and don’t have a sense of what they should do or the direction they should go to change them. But if they can at least begin to articulate how they would like things to be, that then becomes a beginning point for charting the journey.

Typical answers may include things like a better job or being out of debt or success. Other people might want marriage and children and a traditional house in the suburbs. But while all of those things are fine and good, they are really means rather than ends because we all can think of people who have success and are free of debt and have better jobs or have marriage and children and homes, but are still dissatisfied. They still don’t have all they want in life. They sense that they are lacking God’s best for them.

The real goals in life include love and security and being able to cope with the adversities as well as the prosperity of life. It is about these real goals that the words of the benediction in II Thessalonians 3:5 are written when the apostle Paul writes, “May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance.” It’s a brief benediction, one of the briefer ones in the New Testament, yet it incorporates three prayers that the apostle has for his Thessalonian friends, and for us as well.

Prayer number one is a prayer for the direction of the Lord. An ordinary English reading of the expression “May the Lord direct your hearts...” does not really convey the depth of meaning the apostle Paul had either for the Thessalonians or for us. He used the Greek word “katasono”, which literally means to make straight, particularly to make a path straight. But even that English defini-

tion doesn’t really capture all that the Greeks had in mind when they used that word. They used it in terms of opening up or clearing a pathway so that a desired destination could be reached.

Several years ago a missionary plane crashed in Liberia, West Africa, resulting in the loss of lives. Shortly after that Charleen and I were in Liberia and it was very much the topic of conversation among the missionaries. Many of them had colleagues and friends who had been on that small plane. They shared that when the plane went down it was only a short period of time before those in radio communication with the aircraft realized what had happen. With the help of the crash locator signal they were able to find just where the plane had crashed. A rescue team was able to get fairly close to the crash site the same day as the crash because there was an airstrip and a village within a mile or two of where the plane had gone down. However, because of dense, thick jungle it took the rescue team days to arrive at the actual crash site.

I find here a comparison to our human lives because they are much like those jungles. It is sometimes not that difficult to figure out which way we should go. Sometimes we even come surprisingly close only to find that the underbrush of our problems and difficulties is so thick and entangled that when there is a crash—when a marriage falls apart or our health fails or we lose our jobs or have financial reverses—it is almost impossible to cut through all the underbrush. The obstacles are too great to bring in the rescue we need at the time of the crash.

That is why the apostle Paul uses this particular word. He prays for the direction of the Lord, the “katasono” of Jesus, that makes the path straight, that clears the obstacles and cuts away all the accumulated underbrush to get to the heart of the issue. It isn’t an outside set of obstacles that

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God seeks to clear; it is the inside obstacles, the obstacles of our hearts.

This, of course, is not referring physically to the pump that pushes the blood through our bodies. We use the word “heart” for emotions. So we say, “I love you with all my heart.” Or the songwriter says, “I left my heart in San Francisco.” All of that refers to emotions.

I remember hearing a comedian one time talk about what it would be like if another part of our anatomy had been chosen as the seat of emotions. Would we say, “I love you with all my pancreas”? Or, “I left my liver in San Francisco”? Or, “You’re a real stomach throb”?

The Greeks used the word “heart” somewhat as we use it in terms of emotions but, more than that, they used it to refer to the whole inner person. So, in addition to emotions, it included thoughts and will and personality. When they used “cardia” (heart) they meant the entire inside of a person—the way we function on the inside that’s hidden to all those people who are on the outside. So what Paul is praying in II Thessalonians 3:5 is, “May the Lord clear all the obstacles and all of the hindrances out of your personality.”

If Paul were writing today and could use our common everyday speech he would say, “May the Lord clear away all of your hang-ups.” And we all have them! Some of our hang-ups have grown unhindered for the better part of a lifetime. Some are obvious. It might be the hang-up of ambition and so we are driven by desire for success. For someone else it is a hang-up of fear, and while it may not always show on the outside it is clearly obscuring all that God wants for us on the inside. So we become panic stricken at the thought of what tomorrow will hold or what are the repercussions of what we said or did yesterday. For somebody else it may be insecurity. Here, too, we may look on the outside like we have it together, but inside, inside we are terribly insecure. For somebody else it is a hang-up of stubbornness. We decide that this is the way it is going to be and we will not allow anyone or anything to change our minds.

Some hang-ups are less obvious. There are sins and habits, different kinds of hang-ups. Some of

them have been with us for so long that we do not even see them anymore. They are so interwoven with our experiences and our thoughts that we are totally unaware of them. It takes the supernatural vision of God to make us aware of how great these obstacles and problems are.

The Lord knows all the obstacles that are in our innermost being and he desires to cut them away. He wants to clear the path, to give direction, to make straight the course, to open things up for the love of God to flow through. The question is: “Are we willing to acknowledge our hang-ups and allow God to clear them away?”

I would like for us to stop and think about that and pray about it for a moment. Right now. Take a moment to think what are those things in the jungles of our inner selves that stand in the way of being all that God wants us to be. Let’s tell God that we want him to begin cutting down every one of those obstacles that have grown in our lives. Ask him to chop away at those hang-ups that cannot be seen. And then in the words of St. Paul, “May the Lord direct your hearts.” Amen.

I don’t want to give the impression that this is something that simply happens with a prayer or with an acknowledgement of those obstacles, though. That is only the beginning of the cutting away process. So Paul goes on with a second prayer. This time he prays, “May the Lord direct your hearts *into God’s love*.” What an interesting way to put it. For while the Greek language is usually a language of great grammatical clarity, in this case it is one of ambiguity because it is not possible to grammatically tell whether he is talking about love *from* God—so the path is cleared out and the love of God can flow in—or love *for* God—so that the path is cleared out and we can then love God.

Scholars have argued back and forth about it and taken different perspectives through the years on whether it is getting love from God or giving love to God. But could it be that Paul, speaking through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote the words he did to communicate both? Was he intentionally ambiguous? Was he reflecting the concept that John wrote of in I John 4:19 saying,

“We love because he first loved us”? The idea being that when the hang-ups are chopped out, when the path is clear, then at last the sunlight of God’s love is able to shine through and then at last we are able to reflect that love back to God. Love *from* God and love *for* God which then creates the security we need within our lives.

There is an old Scandinavian hymn, one of my favorites, that says, “More secure is no one ever, than the loved ones of the Savior.” You see, we have a quest for security in our lives. That quest is filled in God’s love—his love for us and our love back to him.

There are some people who function best in life when under threat. Perhaps an employee has not functioned very well and a supervisor says, “You have to shape up or you will be demoted or fired.” That person may respond well to that.

I am not like that. If I am secure in a job or marriage or relationships it is that security that motivates me to do my best. In the love of God we find a security that enables us to have the jungles cleared away and to become all that God wants us to become. It is all because of the love of God. And it is quite a love. We are absolutely accepted without prior conditions, eternally, without wavering. It does not fluctuate. It is infinitely sacrificial to the point of God giving his only Son for us. And it’s divinely secure so that we can have that security.

The more we experience the love of God the more secure we become and the more secure we become the freer we are to love God back. All kinds of marvelous things happen. Our self-esteem that was in such a fragile condition is dramatically strengthened. Our fears that were tearing us apart begin to dissolve. And our very best becomes a possibility and then a reality.

Does the picture start to come into focus? When the path is cleared the love of God flows in and our love for him flows out. In the security of that love we are able to say and experience that “more secure is no one ever than the loved ones of

the Savior.”

Once Paul has prayed these things for his Thessalonian friends and for us he also adds a third prayer. This prayer is for the perseverance of Christ. Perseverance means steadfastness or endurance. In fact, those words appear in some English translations of II Thessalonians 3:5. It is the ability to cope with whatever comes in life.

We know that in a foot race it is not only fast runners who win but also those who endure or persevere. You can be a sprinter who takes off lickity split, but if you don’t persevere until the end of the race it doesn’t make any difference if you were the fastest one in the first mile or the first 100 yards. There also has to be perseverance all the way to the finish line.

Some people in the Christian life function fine as long as the terrain is level and the conditions are favorable. But when difficulty and adversity

come along they begin to crumble and fall because they lack perseverance. They do not make it to the finish line.

When things are going well some Christians will pro-

claim their love for God and their loyalty to Christ’s church and to Christ’s cause. But then ill health comes or some Christian friend they have admired deeply disappoints them or finances reverse and they become angry and disappointed with God. They begin to doubt the authenticity of the Bible. They begin to deny everything that previously they had affirmed, because they lack perseverance. Perseverance is not only for the good times but for the difficult times as well. That is why the apostle Paul prays that we as Christians may have Christ’s perseverance, his steadfastness.

Think of Christ’s perseverance. There were points in his ministry when he received the applause of the people. They loved him. When someone is feeding thousands of people and performing miracles and is a scintillating speaker and teacher it’s easy to love him. But it was those same

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crowds who also shouted, "Crucify him!" Yet Jesus endured both. When the accolades came his way he did not become proud and swerve from the purpose to which God had called him. And when adversity, even to the point of crucifixion, was his experience he did not turn aside in his love and loyalty and devotion to God and to God's will. He persevered.

It is the perseverance of Jesus Christ for prosperity and adversity that the apostle asks for us all. That God might seek to cut away the hang-ups of our inner lives so that God's love may come to us and our love be reflected back to him, and so that we then may endure. May we have the same kind of perseverance that Jesus Christ had.

But there is danger in talking about that. Some people will think that perseverance means that we have to tough it out. We have to grin and bear it. But that is not what Paul is praying for us. He is talking about perseverance with hope. That is what perseverance is. It's "hanging in there" with hope. Scottish writer William Barclay put it well. He said it is the Spirit who can bear things not simply with resignation but with blazing hope.

Hope. Now that is not using hope in the sense that I hope the weather is nice tomorrow or I hope everyone has a nice vacation. That is merely wishful thinking. When the word hope is used in the Bible it is talking about certainty that is rooted in the promises and realities of God. So when we speak of the blessed hope of Jesus' return we are not saying it would be nice if he came back again. It is saying that God has said, "This is the way it is going to be." So our blessed hope is a certainty, as yet not seen but sure, because God has declared it. We are to have a blazing hope in Christ's perseverance.

The perseverance of Christ enables Christians to stand firm even when other people fall. It provides us with confidence for the future. Even when the immediate circumstances around us seem to spell out disaster, we have confidence that comes with the hope of the perseverance of Christ. That means displaying the virtues of Jesus Christ when ordinary men and women would crumble under and turn to sin.

Barclay illustrates it by telling the story of a man named George Mathison. George Mathison got a double blow in life at almost the same time. Physically he was blinded. Romantically he was harshly disappointed in love. Even though his eyes were blind he took up pen and paper and wrote down a prayer that reflected the response of his heart both to losing the woman he loved and to losing the sight of his eyes. His prayer was that he would accept the will of God, not with dumb resignation, but with holy joy.

George Mathison had it! He had Christ's perseverance. And that perseverance of Christ is available to us as well, so that whether in prosperity or adversity we respond, not with dumb resignation, but with holy joy.

We see that this benediction is as much for us as for the Thessalonians because we, too, need for God to cut away at our hang-ups, to clear the path, because we need the love of God shining through where once there was only a dark jungle of obstacles. We need the perseverance of Christ in prosperity and adversity. As Paul prayed, "May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance." Amen.

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