

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 8 January 2018

*Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. 1 Thessalonians 1:1.*

Welcome to the 5 T's: 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus. Two thousand years after they were written, we are still reading them and drawing wisdom and encouragement from them. These five letters comprise 5 general letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to a church and to friends. They are 5 of the 13 New Testament books written by Paul, which were actually letters instead of books, and they deal with ministry, encouragement, matters of faith, prophecy, and advice on matters of church practice. Coolest of all, each of them starts with a flourishing greeting which finishes in praying for God's grace and peace to the reader. In reality, all of Paul's letters start this way (though in the Timothy letters he prays for grace, mercy, and peace).

Have you ever started a letter like that? Instead of a Christmas letter, this year my wife and I sent out a New Year's letter (mainly because we were away from home over Christmas). I'd like to think someone will be reading my holiday letters 2000 years from now the way we're reading Paul's but it's 99.9% unlikely. If they did, I'm sure that (like yours) they didn't begin with such flourish.

Are you in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ? Sure you are, you might say; you believe. But have you ever really had someone ask you about it? At the start of a new year (and a new series of books), where are you in God and your Lord? Let's keep it real: it isn't up to us to determine where God has us. It IS up to us to make the choice about whether or not we care about it, though, and what actions we should do if we find ourselves feeling separated from Him.

Make no mistake: God is never away from us. If we feel distant, it isn't because of anything He's done; sometimes it isn't even things we do. Instead, things cloud our hearts that keep us feeling away from Him. Or the enemy tricks us into thinking God is far when, in fact, He's as close as can be. When that happens, it's important to remember Paul's flourishing greetings that end with grace and peace. They're reminders that God's undeserved and unfathomable love is always with us, and that the peace only He gives is always within us.

His grace and peace are all throughout these five letters we begin reading today. Look for them and you'll see that. What's more, you'll be in Him more as you do so. He's in you already.

For further reading: 2 Thessalonians 1:1, Acts 15:22, Acts 16:1, Romans 1:7, Titus 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 2-3.

*Lord, infuse me with Your grace and peace. Thank You for inspiring these letters into Paul so long ago.*

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## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 9 January 2018

*Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. 1 Thessalonians 1:1.*

A few more words, please, about the opening to this letter. Notice that it speaks for three people: Paul, Silas, and Timothy (as does the opening to 2 Thessalonians). As mentioned yesterday, all of Paul's letters open with a flourish, and all of them open by naming (at least) the apostle. Romans opens with Paul only (as do Ephesians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus), Paul and Sosthenes open 1 Corinthians, Paul and Timothy in 2 Corinthians (also Philippians, Colossians and Philemon), and Paul and "all the brothers with me" begin Galatians.

What does this mean? To me, it speaks of the honesty of a growing movement. Put yourself back in the First Century Mediterranean world dominated by Rome. It was a barbaric culture spread across three continents. Paul wrote many of his letters to churches in modern day Turkey (Corinth, Galatia, Colosse, and Ephesus are there) while Timothy was from that same area. Philippi and Thessalonica are in Greece (with Thessalonica actually being in Macedonia), and it is believed Philemon was from Colosse. All these churches grew out of Paul's missionary efforts that began on the road to Damascus (in modern day Syria). If you look at a map you see that Paul's missionary journeys took him north from the Transjordan, around the Mediterranean coast, and even as far west as Rome (where he was eventually martyred). That's a distance of hundreds, even thousands, of miles: all of it by foot, wagon or boat.

That doesn't happen without reason.

All along the way, people listened. Many listened, some rejected, but others believed. Enough people believed to start churches, formal underground groups of followers committed to this new message of Jesus Christ, Himself only recently crucified. The movement grew in spite of Roman physical oppression and Jewish ecclesiastical persecution. It grew across languages, cultures, and boundaries. Indeed, the three men who wrote just this letter were all from vastly different backgrounds with Paul being Judean, Silas a Greek, and Timothy from what we consider to be Turkey.

Again, that doesn't happen by chance. The fact that three men from different countries could come together to evangelize a radical new belief system that preached real non-violence, peace, and love towards enemies speaks volumes. Even with 24/7 global communications, that rarely happens even today. Yet that's what happened in Paul's day, in Paul's life. Before now, maybe you didn't consider the implications of a simple though eccentric greeting in an obscure letter. Hopefully after this, you'll never forget it.

For further reading: Read the first verses of the first chapters of Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon.

*Lord, thank You for the spectacular nature of Your church and the diverse leaders who started it.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 10 January 2018

*We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 1 Thessalonians 1:2.*

This is something with which I struggle. In fact, it was the subject of my personal devotion just this week. How can someone continually pray?

If you read the verse, you'd think that all Paul, Silas, and Timothy did was pray; all day long, nothing but prayer. Even in the first century, that would have been socially odd. If you were praying all the time, you wouldn't get anything else done. You'd actually turn off the people you're trying to witness. Quite honestly, if you aren't working, you aren't using the talents and resources God made available to you, and that itself is ungodly (and lazy).

Joyce Meyer says that prayer is an attitude. It's an action that we should do like breathing, even unconsciously. "Our spiritual life is designed to be nurtured and sustained by continual prayer," she said. Our spirit feeds on time with God. We feed it through prayer, which is a conversation between you and your Maker. It's the way God gives us to communicate our thoughts and feelings to Him, and it's one way He imparts His voice into our lives. Think of it: you get to have a one-on-one, private (if you want it to be) conversation with the Creator of all things and the God who saved you from your sins. You don't need a priest or pastor to do it for you: you GET TO do it yourself. He hears you and He always answers you, even when the answer takes years to understand. Sometimes it's a formal conversation and sometimes it's just a chat.

Yet know these things. Prayer isn't about always hitting your knees, or bowing your head, or even doing it in private. To pray, you don't have to say the Lord's Prayer first, or end every sentence with "selah" or "amen." You don't have to act formal, and you don't have to be in a church pew, be led by a pastor (or have him and only him do the praying), and you don't have to pray in a deep voice that might resonate in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century king's English.

Indeed, so many "don'ts" seem to paint prayer in a completely different light, one different from the kind of light painted by Paul, Silas, and Timothy. And Joyce Meyer. The light these folks shine on prayer is that it's a way to talk with God, to thank Him for all He does, and to talk with Him about other people who affect you. It's an active way to battle evil. It's a real thing instead of just some church practice. It's something we get to do as easily and frequently as breathing.

For further reading: Romans 1:8, Ephesians 5:20, Philippians 1:3-4, 1 Thessalonians 1:3.

*Lord, thank You for prayer. Hear my prayers, teach me to pray better, and thank You for the blessing You give of other people.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 11 January 2018

*We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Thessalonians 1:3.*

I like to work. In the last year, I've been out of work twice, twice let go (ok, fired) from jobs I enjoyed for which I was qualified. Twice I was let go when I didn't deserve it. Years ago, a friend said to me that the best way to destroy a man is to destroy his ability to work. He was correct because unemployment feels like a depressing cycle, like you're swirling in a whirlpool of mire and you can't pull yourself out. All you want is a chance to earn, to contribute, to prove yourself and you don't get that chance. What folks say about being older and out of work is true. It is tougher when you're in your fifties to be out of work than it was in your twenties. You question your worth more, you're scared of the future, and you feel even more powerless to stop the cycle.

This is a good time, then, to re-read the verse above, and remember that work done through faith in God is NEVER meaningless and always produces more than it uses. This past time of unemployment and uncertainty has only been ameliorated by faith in God.

Sure, it's still scary, but it's less scary than it could be when I remember that God has been using this time to prepare me for other things (new job, new places, new missions). He has taken things out of my life that I don't need anymore, or to which I can't usefully contribute; it's not about me and may indeed be about other people I don't even know. Whatever the reason, God has been using this time to draw me closer to Himself and teach me things I might not have learned otherwise.

God has been using this time to give me other work, like this blog and a new devotional I'm writing and a new book that's underway. These are labors of love, like the farm I worked and the marriage which is thriving because my wife and I drew closer together in our faith. And God has built up our endurance because there are good days and even harder days ahead when He wants us to be able to endure, persevere, and succeed. Without faith in God, all my work is meaningless. With Him, it's a way of life and a daily mission field of adventure.

For further reading: Philippians 4:20, Galatians 5:6, 2 Thessalonians 1:11, James 2:14-26, 1 Thessalonians 3:6, 1 Corinthians 13:13, Romans 8:25, 1 Thessalonians 1:4

*Father God, thank You for the hardships in my life. Thank You, more, for using them to teach me, build me up, and to let these struggles be a blessing to others.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 15 January 2018

*For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5.*

These are perfect verses for Martin Luther King Day (which is today). I'm not one to beatify Dr. King because he was a just a man; a brave, great man who said and did big, great things that needed to be said and done but still just one more sinful man. Yer it's undeniable that, during his short life, Dr. King moved among us with the power and deep conviction of God's Holy Spirit. He lived, preached, spoke out, stood up, and made his life count by relying on the power of his Savior to guide him.

Tell me, what are you doing with the life that God has chosen you to live? You and I don't have the position, history, or impact of a Martin Luther King; that's true. Yet you and I do have the exact same thing he had: a gospel that came crashing into our lives with power and God's conviction. It's the kind of conviction that speaks of its truth instead of just the legal conviction of your guilt. You may not feel sure of God's power and love in your life every minute, but it's still there. You may have questions for Him about why you're going through whatever you're going through, but Jesus' love and power are still within you. You may be angry at Him for reasons only you can explain, but the divine power and love of the Three In One God are still THE truth and still your truth. You may even say you reject all this, but God's love and power doesn't depend on your rejection, and (I'm sorry to tell you) they aren't lessened by it either.

So, again, what are you doing with the life God chose you to live? He chose you. He made you exactly the way you are. Right or wrong, fair or unfair, sick or healthy, rich or poor, no matter what color or sex you are, God chose you right where you are to be you, to live your life and do your part in His overall plan. You don't have to be Martin Luther King; he wasn't you. You don't have to do famous, big things (or maybe you do). You simply have to live the life God gave you and do your best within it by living out the faith He chose you to live. For the final time, what are you doing with the life God chose you to live? We know what Martin Luther King did with his. What say you?

For further reading: Colossians 3:12, 2 Thessalonians 2:13, 2 Corinthians 2:12, Romans 1:16.

*Lord, thank You for this life. I pray use me to Your glory.*

May only be used

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## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 16 January 2018

*You know how we lived among you for your sake. 1 Thessalonians 1:5.*

Before we move on, let's discuss the last sentence of verse 5.

Our dog, Josh, had been part of our family since September 2006, and he got very sick these last few months. Yesterday, it was time to say goodbye, so we made an appointment with a vet to have him put to sleep; that's what you do as a pet owner. Josh died bravely, and he licked me on the face just a few seconds before he received the injection. It tore at me but I didn't want to see my canine friend suffer. He was my pal, and I loved him. My wife and I cried together as he died.

I have another friend, not canine, who is battling terminal cancer. She and I were co-workers, and we've stayed friends over the years, commiserating over work, sharing life stories. My friend has battled cancer already, but this time the disease is likely to win. How do you support someone who is facing death? Do we ever really know what to say when they are fighting this battle we all must eventually fight?

The Apostle Paul, Silas, and Timothy had lived among the people of the church at Thessalonica. They had witnessed to the parishioners, helped them set up things from the start, and helped them to hold fast to this new and fast-spreading faith. At the time this was happening, Christianity was brand-new. When the congregation was figuring out how to do things, how to worship in the face of real, physical persecution, they did so without history to guide them. They were setting that precedent; they were figuring out how to do things for the first time.

What a comfort it must have been to have these storied men live among them, be themselves among them, and help them through this difficult time.

Perhaps that's a lesson we can remember now, in difficult times when we lose loved ones and face the troubles life gives us. God gives us people in our lives to live among us for our sake. He gives us each other to support each other, encourage each other, love on each other. God chooses to live among us by living through us and letting us share Him through how we live. Famous people don't make the world go around: you and I, living out our faith, do.

What do we say when our friends and family face death, when times are tough and we don't know what else to say or do? We love them as Jesus would, listening, talking, feeling for them when they hurt, even saying goodbye. We do what Paul and his friends did, for their sake, for their comfort. For Jesus' glory.

For further reading: Colossians 3:12, 2 Thessalonians 2:13, 2 Corinthians 2:12, Romans 1:16, 1 Thessalonians 1:6.

*My Lord, teach me to live Your love for other and to others in my circle.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 17 January 2018

*You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7.*

People are watching. That's one of the most urgent reasons why we should walk the walk and talk the talk. It's also one of the things I really stink at doing. If you don't walk the walk and talk the talk, people quickly notice because people are always watching. People are quick to find out if you're a fraud or a hypocrite.

Have you ever had to learn to do something strictly by rote? There's a reason. And have you ever had to watch what you say around kids? Kids who are learning to talk will imitate what adults say. They are always watching. And what about the jackals of the press? Sure, a free and independent media is crucial to keeping government within its boundaries but it seems like the American press is everywhere these days and reporting EVERYTHING, fact and fiction alike. What's more, we the people enthusiastically gobble up what they feed us.

It's because we're watching. We're watching each other and learning to imitate what we hear, see and do.

Paul praised the church members in Thessalonica for imitating the behavior he and his companions exhibited. What was that behavior? Loving on each other; forgiveness; understanding; patience; forbearance; self-discipline; empathy and caring; you know, the behaviors Jesus demonstrated. These new believers acted the way they saw their 'prophets' acting and, in doing so, led a revolution around them. It was how the church spread so quickly, not by the sword (as happened later with Islam) but by the conduct of these Jesus followers. And it did indeed spread quickly, in a generation growing from 12 frightened commoners in Jerusalem to millions of followers through Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, north Africa, and up into southern Europe.

Because people were watching.

Got skin, got sin. We are always works in progress, but there's always work to be done on this matter. Folks who don't believe are watching us for signs of our hypocrisy, whether it's foul language, philandering, dishonesty, or what we post on social media. I'm so guilty of messing up in all these areas; how about you? Do you ever wonder if unbelievers are actually watching, though, more for reasons to believe instead of just how to trip us up? We mustn't let them down. If, like me, you think you're guilty of not walking the walk, chances are you are. The solution, then, is to go back to basics and imitate Paul, Silas, and Timothy. They imitated Jesus.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 4:16, Acts 17:5-10, 2 Corinthians 6:10, 1 Timothy 4:12, Acts 16:9, Acts 18:12, 1 Thessalonians 8-10.

*Lord, please forgive me when I fail you by not living what I believe. Help me to do better today.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 18 January 2018

*The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10.*

Actions really do speak louder than words, don't they! Dovetailing off our theme (from yesterday) that people are always watching, here's the follow through. When people are watching and we both walk the walk and talk the talk, God's work is done and the news spreads.

It's like the dye in the water thing. You know what I'm talking about. You get a glass of water and drop in a single drop of food dye. Without even touching the glass, soon the dye distributes throughout the glass. It happens even quicker if you stir the water.

It's like good news spreading like wildfire (which it is). Yes, the details tend to differ from person to person – have you read the four Gospels? – but the message is maintained. No, the “telephone game” isn't always how things work, especially when there are people like me who play that game and deliberately change the message whispered to us. In reality, the core message is usually preserved as the core message quickly spreads.

Even in bad times, bad news never endures. Sure, it's preserved and we remember the bad times; we must guard against evil. But bad never prevails; it never outweighs the good times. The good news of Christ's salvation was known in full at the time of 1 Thessalonians just as it is now. That's the best news humanity has ever heard: that faith in Jesus means we live forgiven forever. That news took root even in the first century and grew quickly far beyond the confines of ancient Palestine. The oppressive Romans eventually fell away. The oppression of Islam hadn't happened yet and still hasn't prevailed. The terror of war, the hardships of poverty, the hatred of racism are all powerless against the good news of Christ. They didn't win out with the Thessalonians and they aren't winning out with us. Indeed, the end of human history has already been foretold; it's central to the Gospel. God vanquishes evil once and for all and restores what evil tried to destroy.

Those actions will speak much louder than anything evil says because people are always watching and listening. They're why the Gospel always spreads quickly and why it can always take root in the fertile soil of needful human hearts.

For further reading: 2 Thessalonians 3:1, Romans 1:8, Acts 14:15, 1 Corinthians 12:2, Galatians 4:8, Matthew 16:16, 1 Thessalonians 2:1.

*My Lord, I need Your good news today! Bless others as You bless me through living out Your Word.*



## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 25 January 2018

*You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. 1 Thessalonians 1 Thessalonians 2:1.*

Last time we talked (again) about how actions speak louder than words. It's simply a basic truth that this happens. People believe us more when we do things that make our words credible. Indeed, it is *only* our actions that give credibility to our words. That's one of the reasons why Scripture is so reliable: God's actions always back up His words.

And those words always produce results.

Yes, I mean it (and we aren't God). Words always produce results; things happen. What we say leads to something. Certainly what the omniscient God says always leads to things happening. Every page of the Bible speaks of God's love and consequences when people turn from it. Every story in Scripture proves that God means what He says.

When Paul and his companions worked with the church in Thessalonica, they saw results. These missionaries ministered in their actions, in their words, all the time every day. Their focus was on living out their praise for God in everything they said and did so that their hosts, the Thessalonians, might emulate and believe. People there responded and the church took root. It expanded and it spread. Two thousand years later, we're reading about it; two thousand years later, the fundamentals of walk the walk and talk the talk when you're witnessing for Jesus are still the basics of being a missionary.

You're working: work for Jesus. You're having a beer with friends: drink (responsibly) for Jesus. You're running errands on Saturday morning: run them for Jesus. You're arguing with your spouse: argue (lovingly) for Jesus. In doing these things, you'll see results. It might be immediate or it might take a while, but you'll see results all the same. God uses we imperfect people to spread His word and carry His message in what we say and do. When we do that, it's really Him at work through us. He changes things; He molds them to serve His good purposes. Like a farmer He prepares the soil, seeds it well, cares for it and tends to it. And because of that, a good crop can grow.

Sometimes it's hard to see all this. We want results now; we're an instant gratification world. Sometimes God's results aren't instant, and we get discouraged. It's important, then, to constantly remain vigilant, to be in His word, to let Him re-mold our hearts from selfish to thankful, to act in ways that exemplify the good fruit of His Spirit. When we do those things, He shines through us. That's the first, best result of all.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10, 2 Thessalonians 1:10, 1 Thessalonians 2:2

*Lord Jesus, I pray to have You shine through me. Produce good results through my words and actions that others would come to know You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 26 January 2018

*We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. 1 Thessalonians 1 Thessalonians 2:2.*

We the people tend to remember daring acts of bravery. Remember the Alamo; remember Pearl Harbor. We remember times when people do heroic things worthy of memory. You've (hopefully) heard the accounts of people in our world today who are being persecuted for believing in Jesus. That may seem like something from our distant past, like we of the 'modern' world have learned to live beyond such savagery. But the fact is that we haven't. Just last week I read a story about how the communist government in China tore down a large church. The people who worshipped there are under surveillance, and it's a good thing to assume quite a few have been questioned or arrested. Just for believing in Jesus.

And did you know that it is a crime that carries a death sentence to publicly declare or preach faith in Jesus in Iran, Saudi Arabia, North Korea and Pakistan? In Mauritania, Libya, Morocco, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh it is illegal to declare yourself as a Christian. In the workplace in many cities and states of America it is officially frowned upon to minister to others or even profess your faith (to be fair, not just faith in Jesus, yet faith in Jesus seems to be tolerated least of all).

Outrageous treatment? To be sure. Suffering for the faith? In many places in our world today, yes, this happens. Stand up for Jesus? No, that isn't tough at all...

Those who dare to share the gospel in the face of this treatment are heroes. Indeed, it is energizing and invigorating to stand up for Jesus in the face of people who oppress you. It demonstrates courage and a belief in human dignity to act in ways that show the fruit of His Spirit, then to stand up and tell just why you do what you do. People remember that kind of thing, and I dare say most of them remember it with respect.

Read through Scripture to the end and you know that the end of all things is already foretold. Evil will be vanquished. God will once and for all destroy evil and relegate Satan and all who reject God to the terror of everlasting existence away from Him. Yet before all that happens we are told things will get even tougher for believers. Tough times are coming; you can even feel it in the air, and people are watching. What will they see you do? How will you be remembered?

For further reading: Acts 14:19, Acts 16:22, Philipians 1:30, 1 Thessalonians 2:3

*Lord, thank You for preserving me through oppression and persecution. Be the steel in my spine and put Your words in my mouth when people challenge me to deny you.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 29 January 2018

*We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. 1 Thessalonians 2:2.*

Something else needs to be said before we move on. To paraphrase Ecclesiastes, without God, everything is meaningless but nothing can contain Him.

I was reading about how Google Home doesn't recognize the name of Jesus. A story online said that the in-home smart speaker recognizes the names of Buddha, Allah, and even Satan and can relay to you a whole encyclopedia of knowledge about those names, but that it says "I'm sorry I don't understand" (or something like that) when you ask it about Jesus or Jesus Christ. Newsflash, my friends, God doesn't need Google Home but He loves the people who make and use it anyway. Ditto Alexa, Echo, Facebook, Bing, and any other gadget or browser we can think of. Indeed, God's word will spread even MORE when people deny it.

Crazy? Yes, actually it is. The conventional world can't see how this makes sense, but the world that believes in Jesus can. His word is too good to be contained; it's too good to be bottled up or confined by the smallness of human activity. People can try, but the good news always comes through. It did in concentration camps. It does in prisons, and inner cities, and communist re-education camps, and even in Hollywood. It even happens in organized churches.

In this verse, Paul describes how people strongly opposed his preaching. In Philippi Paul had been strongly opposed and it stung him. He considered it outrageous that God's word would be opposed, that anyone would try to interfere with or target or stop the preaching of words ordained by the Lord Himself. Yet despite the opposition, word spread. People all over Greece and Asia Minor wanted to know more about what these missionaries of "The Way" were saying. Tyrannical Romans couldn't stop the message. Hostile Jews and their synagogues couldn't stop the message. Skeptical Greeks and hateful pagans couldn't stop it. By the time Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he was used to being opposed, and he began to recognize that it was to God's glory that all this happened.

That was true 2000 years ago. It's still true today. God doesn't need us to preach His message. He can get it out any way He chooses. Yet He chooses us to do it for Him, to talk about it one on one, to build relationships based on common worship and understanding of Him because without Him everything else means nothing. God chooses to work through us as we love one person at a time. Nothing could contain that way back then; nothing can contain it now.

For further reading: Ecclesiastes, Acts 14:19, Acts 16:22, Philippians 1:30, 1 Thessalonians 2:3

*Lord, I pray: work through me today. Love others through me. Teach me to represent You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 30 January 2018

*For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. 1 Thessalonians 2:3.*

These messages are delivered to you electronically. We're blessed to have an Internet that allows us to easily, quickly, cheaply exchange information. Yet even though this is true, let's face it: there's a LOT of disinformation and outright lies on the internet. News, opinion, statistics: we live in the era of fake news. Let's not even get into the mire about how that moniker affects our current politics. Much of what you see, read, and hear today isn't real.

And it isn't anything new.

Within minutes of hearing about the resurrection, the political and religious elites of the Paul's day were concocting cover stories about Jesus' body being stolen, about drunken guards, and other angles; initially, Paul was one of those elites. Everywhere the Apostles went they were confronted by people who didn't believe it was possible for any man to come back to life. Even when Paul discussed his own conversion in intimate, one on one settings, he wasn't believed, wasn't trusted.

Nothing has changed. Don't believe me? Try arguing an atheist out of his science and his faith in the knowledge he has about the origin of species. Two thousand years later, people still argue about the reliability of the gospels. About just what did happen at that garden tomb on that first Easter morning. As you can read from today's verse, people argued with Paul about it (and they were centuries closer to the actual event than you or I), even as there were still (at the time) guards and witnesses who had seen Christ alive after the Resurrection. What would make Paul talk about all this?

You know.

The appeal Paul made to the Thessalonians wasn't any different from the appeal his words make to us. They talk to us of things about God, and they are trustworthy and true because God has never been disproven in His words. God's words, spoken through men like Paul, speak of truth and love and forgiveness. Any other quality would have long since been disproven; any other thing would simply have fallen apart. Not so the witness of the Apostles. Nothing could contain God's word, and nothing would stop it from spreading. When God spoke to Paul, Paul simply HAD TO share it because what was entrusted to him was too good to hoard.

Yet his readers, like us, are just people, and people are skeptical. So Paul testifies and reminds his reader that his motive is pure, that he's passing on what was given to Him by the Lord. You and I can take that to the bank even if you read it on the Internet.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:4.

*Lord, thank You for speaking through Paul, and for touching my heart to hear and grasp Your words.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 13 February 2018

*For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. 1 Thessalonians 2:3-4*

What good does it do to try to please God? I mean, if I live a good life, do the best I can, am kind to people (even love people), and do what I can to hurt as few people as possible on my journey through life, doesn't that please God?

Oh, my friend, that thought is flirting with damnation. Me, I'll pass on that option. I'm not one like Paul, entrusted with the Gospel, approved by God to preach the good news...or am I? Or are you?

Fact is, if you believe in your heart that Jesus is Lord, or if you say "yes, I believe" when someone asks if you believe in Him, then you ARE being entrusted with the gospel. God has given to you the privilege of sharing the news about Him that says, "I want all people to know about me." He wants to use you to tell people that anything other than Him is the way to ruin, and that the way to Him is through following His son, Jesus.

God tests us like this every single day. Sometimes it's testing by virtue of trusting Him to put the words in your mouth when opportunities present themselves. Sometimes it's by resisting temptations. Sometimes it's knowing when to NOT say something, when to listen and be a friend. God tests us by giving us a gut check, not to accuse us, but to purify us, to clarify us.

Our reaction? We make that exasperating. God doesn't do it to us: we do it to ourselves. God's motives are pure and they're up-front, not deceitful. He wants us to love Him from the heart, without reservation or evasion. It's exasperating when we complicate it, when we add to it. When we do that, we seem to act like we need to try to please God. Nothing could be further from the truth. God is pleased with us because of His grace, not because of what we do. Because of this, we get to do the things we do to line up with who He already is instead of trying to do for ourselves something we can't do. There is no limit to God's grace.

Just like there's no limit to sharing His gospel. Sure, there are places in our society where you formally aren't allowed to proclaim Christ. In those places, do so in your actions. Be a caring friend. Listen and love. Share Jesus in words and deeds. When we do that, God is pleased.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:5.

*Lord, I'm blessed by Your grace. Thank You for Your Gospel, your tests, and Your Son.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 14 February 2018

*You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. 1 Thessalonians 2:5-6*

Today is Valentine's Day. Today is a day to celebrate being in love, being loved by someone, and loving someone. If you think about it, it's actually the most Christian of holidays. No, I'm not going into the history because some of it is morbid and, quite frankly, much of it is sordid. Instead, I say what I said based on Paul's comments above.

When you love someone, you don't flatter them with useless words. You love them by the things that you do backing up those words. When you do that, it isn't false flattery: it's a compliment.

Love isn't greedy either. It doesn't want something for nothing; it doesn't want excess from avarice. Instead, love wants to give, wants to share of itself just because it's love.

And love doesn't seek praise. Love gives praise. When you love someone, you see their good and bad sides, yet you accept both and love them because of them.

Now is a good day, too, to read Paul's comments to the Corinthians in "the love chapter" of 1 Corinthians (chapter 13). No better explanation of the character of love can be found in any language. Read that chapter and you see how, as Paul describes the thing we call love, he's actually describing Jesus. All those desirable qualities of love describe Jesus because, when you boil it down, Jesus is true love.

What's the point? Simple: any day set aside to glorify love is actually glorifying God. God is love and is the ordainer of love. God commands us to do many things, but He asks us to do them in love. We don't have to, but we get to: out of love. He gave us His revelation to demonstrate to us His character, His heart, and His ways. Yes, there are people who lord the Lord over others, but they aren't demonstrating the love that is of God. Today isn't to celebrate them: today is to remember love, and to remember that the originator of love is only Jesus Christ, the son of God.

So today, when you give a sweet candy to your sweetie, remember you're sharing a little bit of Jesus. When you give a card or hand out those little cards and favors in school, you're giving away some Jesus. When you say "I love you" and when you do things, buy gifts to give to someone special, you're giving away some Jesus. Love goes like that because that's how Jesus goes. Happy Valentine's Day.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 13, 1 Thessalonians 2:7.

*Lord, I love You. Thank You for being my Savior, my love, all love, and my friend.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 15 February 2018

*You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. 1 Thessalonians 2:5-6*

Let's talk about your authority as a follower of Jesus. You do realize you have a LOT of authority because you follow Jesus, right?

But before talking about that, a few caveats. First of all, let's not be jerks about it. Following Jesus is a privilege, a good thing, not a reason to be unkind. Christianity isn't a game of "I'm better than you" or "I've got a secret." It's about giving glory to Christ by living in ways that make people want to know about Him. That's hard to do if we're being jerks. How about we try to listen, stay quiet, and be still instead?

And it's not about memorizing a ton of Bible verses, being able to sing every hymn in the hymnal, or showing up to every service because you think it's expected of you. Being a follower of Jesus also doesn't mean not enjoying yourself. Do you think Jesus liked to laugh, preferred smiling to frowning, thought it was better to go through life with a positive outlook than a negative one?

All that being said, you have authority because you are a person who is personally forgiven of the eternal consequences of your sins by the very creator of the universe Himself. You are an immortal being – yes, I mean that – whose life here is only a precursor of an eternal life that comes after. You have been given the privilege of sharing personal news from the Savior of all mankind, namely that He wants everyone to know Him the way you do. You have a one-on-one relationship with the only person in human history who foretold His own resurrection, who fulfilled over 300 ancient prophecies, and who took on the sins of all mankind so mankind wouldn't suffer for them.

Brother (or sister), if that doesn't give you authority to speak as Jesus' representative, nothing does.

There are formal officers and leaders in the church, men and women who are ecclesiastically trained for their jobs. They have formal Christian authority, but don't forget they're just men and women, sinners like you and me; some of them even read this blog. And there are many Christians who walk their walk better than you or I do; that's true. But don't ever forget that you have authority, given to you by God the minute you said "I believe", to proclaim Him as Lord in your own special way. Don't get cocky about it, but don't ever forget that nobody can take it away from you either.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:7.

*Lord, thank You for giving me authority in my life to witness for You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 19 February 2018

*...but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. 1 Thessalonians 2:7 (NIV).*

You and I know many, many people who are going through tough times. Divorce, death, unemployment, drugs, alcoholism, bankruptcy, starvation and hunger, grudges, societal collapse, school murders, loss of homes, loss of friends, loss of self, loss of faith: need I go on? You and I both know people, perhaps ourselves, who are enduring these real hardships in this fallen world. Living through them can really make you wonder where God is in all of this and how it can be that He is actually with us when we're going through them.

Might I suggest that we should live life like children. For the good of our faith in God, for the good of those around us, and for our own good, we should out our faith like young children.

This isn't to say we should be immature. This doesn't say we should give up wisdom, lessons-learned, knowledge or experience. That isn't what the Bible says; it certainly isn't what Paul is saying. Remember that the previous verse reminded the Thessalonians how they, like Paul, had the authority of Christ Himself as the basis for their personal authority. This one reminds them (and us) to exercise that authority like moms and kids would.

Go into today with the child-like innocence to accept things at face value. Later there will be time to analyze, to think it over, to be wise and wary, but accept 'yes' as 'yes' and 'no' as 'no.' Trust. Simply trust people. That doesn't mean we should be foolish or unwise in granting our trust, but when given the opportunity to trust God and trust others (or even to trust our abilities), then go for it and trust. Smile. Love. Accept happiness. Be forthright and generous. Play, look for fun, and jump in the mud puddle already. Be childlike and accepting in how we look at the world today. When it hurts, too, go ahead and cry. All of it is ok and Godly.

Through it all, don't forget to also act like a mother, a parent, watching over someone's childlike innocence. Protect the people you love and guard their hearts. Give your own and give of yourself so that others might prosper. If you don't know what to do in this tough old world, ask yourself what a good mom would do.

Better yet, ask that kitschy question "what would Jesus do?" You know that the cure for the common tough times is a whole lot of Jesus. And Jesus abides with us this way.

Here there will always be tough times. As long as day turns to night, we'll have those. Jesus doesn't promise we won't go through them: He promises He'll be there with us when we do. When that happens, let's accept it like kids.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:11, 1 Thessalonians 2:8.

*Lord, bless me with child-like faith in You.*



## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 20 February 2018

*We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well because you had become so dear to us. 1 Thessalonians 2:8 (NIV).*

Can you really share the gospel of Jesus Christ without sharing yourself? If that kind of question makes you uncomfortable, I'll ask it a different way. If you don't really share yourself, can you ever really love?

When Paul and his friends stayed with the Thessalonians, they became true friends. They talked; they listened; they helped out in things that needed to be done; they laughed and cried; they debated and argued; they forgave; they worked to earn their keep. In doing so, they did what you and I would do in a similar situation: they shared themselves. They shared themselves in genuinely caring ways, looking out for their new friends and sharing their own love like trusting children would. Not so long before those new friends had been strangers, then they weren't. The difference was in sharing Christ's love.

Is there any other way to really share your love?

We're so fond of talking about how we love, demonstrating we're in love, falling in love, being in love, that we miss the point of love: love is Christ. Real love is a gift of and a quality of and the essence of the Creator of all things. He loves us enough to breathe life into us, provide for us, abide with us, chastise yet forgive us, hold our hands as we do the dumbest things, and be with us in the toughest times. If we really, truly do love someone, we love with the devotion of Jesus, sharing Him in that love.

We each know few people who are going through divorce. Just today I learned of a friend who lost their job, no notice. There are people who are struggling through dying, through letting go of hurt, through watching kids grow up, go away, and become distant. There are desperately lonely people all around us, desperate for someone to share with them. In a world where there is so much hurt, how can we not love, not share ourselves?

Paul and his companions didn't stay in Thessalonica. They moved on; they kept going where the gospel message led them. They loved their new friends for a short while, then they moved on and made new friends, shared their lives again, with new people. It's how they shared the gospel that Christ Himself had entrusted to Paul. Two millenia later, we are to do the same thing. You can't love without sharing yourself, without letting down your guard. You can't share the gospel unless you do the same. Is that so tough?

For further reading: Romans 1:1, 2 Corinthians 12:15, 1 John 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 2:9.

*Lord, teach me more to share You by loving other people.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 21 February 2018

*Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. 1 Thessalonians 2:9 (NIV).*

Usually I write these blog posts the night before I post them. Last night, I was busy calculating my taxes so I didn't get to write until morning. I take that as yet another proof that God knows what He's doing and is active in even the little details of our lives.

Word came this morning that Billy Graham has died. I think of a few things when I think of Rev Graham, mostly that I met him once, saw him twice, and turned off the TV when he was on dozens of times when I was a kid. Today I think that 1 Thessalonians 2:9 is a fitting verse by which to remember him.

The words I write and share here won't reach 2 billion people, but Billy Graham's did. I've never met 9 presidents and witnessed the gospel personally to them, but Billy Graham did (indeed, George W. Bush credits Graham for personally ministering to him in a way that let him turn cold turkey from alcoholism and never turn back). I never traveled behind the Iron Curtain for the specific purpose of talking about Jesus, but Billy Graham did. I never did this or that or one or the other but Reverend Graham did.

So what? Through it all, Mr. Graham was just like you and me. He was a sinner. On his own, he wasn't worthy to lick God's bootheels. Without God's intervention, he was damned. Because of Jesus, none of that mattered. Because of Jesus, Billy Graham got to meet Him face to face today: just like you and I can when our lives are over.

I once went to a Billy Graham crusade; I once met him in person. In those days, that was simply another happening to me, another check box I could fill about having done something for God. I didn't realize that Graham, as a speaker, was using his platform to tell me what God had already done for me. In time, I came to admire that, came to better understand it. There was no decision for Christ I made other than simply acknowledging what Jesus had already done in full. Yet when that understanding came, it made all the difference in my life.

Today you'll read a great many things about Billy Graham, then tomorrow the world will move on to its next big thing. That's how it goes here, and really that's how it should be. But for today, celebrate the kingdom work of a man who used his time to tell us all "Jesus loves you." The longer I live, the more I see that's the most fitting epitaph of all. Rest in peace Reverend and welcome home.

For further reading: Thessalonians 2:10.

*Lord, thank You for this good servant.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 26 February 2018

*You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. 1 Thessalonians 2:10 (NIV).*

This verse convicts me because, you see, I haven't been righteous or blameless lately. The last time I wrote here I was eulogizing Billy Graham, one of my heroes and, I believe, a much better witness for God than me. Billy Graham was never a jerk on social media, but I have been.

There are things that I feel very strongly about, very passionate about, and I have shared my strong opinions on Facebook and Twitter, sometimes even here in this blog. But I haven't been holy, righteous or blameless among the believers or unbelievers in how I've done that.

God doesn't tell us to not have opinions, and He doesn't tell us to not stand up for things we believe in. What He does tell us is to have those opinions and stand up as we will with His heart, His motivation, and His truth as our only guide because anything else is sinful. By that fair measure, then, I haven't been holy, righteous or blameless in how I've shared my opinions. That bothers me. God is indeed a witness of all we think, say and do, and since that's true, then I've fallen short in this way and, I'm sure, many others. When I read this verse, I'm convicted, guilty of failing God by failing others.

Paul placed paramount importance on being upright and blameless in front of the people to whom he ministered. He realized they hadn't had the kind of encounter with Christ that he'd had. And he realized that his former life as a persecuting Pharisee placed unusual burdens on both his credibility and the ways other people would see him. So whenever he traveled anywhere, Paul made sure his words and his conduct were Godly and pure.

Um, I'm not Paul. I haven't done those things. I need God's forgiveness for falling short and misusing the bully pulpit He's given me.

We live in contentious times, times in which there are Christians in our world who really are being persecuted. Our society is rotting from within; our culture is set against faith; our politics have turned bitter and the divisions are deepening. Yet God is God of all whether we acknowledge Him or not. For those of us who believe, we're like Paul, being held to a higher standard. So I ask for your prayers that I would do better and thinking, saying and doing things with more of the heart God has instead of the rash thoughts of old Adam (or Dave).

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians 1:12, 1Thessalonians 2:11.

*Lord, forgive me for how I've failed you in my thoughts and actions. Thank You for convicting me with Your word. Teach me to do better for You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 27 February 2018

*For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 (NIV).*

Dad's love unconditionally and hold you accountable. Dads love their kids, or at least they should, and they impart of themselves into their kids by encouraging, comforting, and urging them to live lives worthy of God. That means teaching them how to make their ways in the world, how to do what they love to do, how to be strong, how to get along with others. Dads are supposed to also teach their kids about Jesus, imparting to them lessons that the Maker wants him to tell them so they can come to know the Maker as well.

At least that's what we're supposed to do. News flash: we dads don't always do a great job at it.

Take me. but I do wish I had done better for my own kids. I wish I had not obsessed so much about grades, making their beds, the music they listened to or the movies they watched; you know, things that don't really matter that much. Sure, it's important to work hard to get good grades, and it's important to garner the self-discipline you get from making your bed. Those things are important, but compared to Jesus they don't matter very much. More than anything else, I wish I had done more to live out my life for Jesus and be a better example of Him to the three people who watched me most. As a young dad, I did a poor job at this.

None of us are blameless; I'm not blameless. I let my job, my selfish desires, and my own obsessions get in the way of being a better dad. But if the best thing we can say is "I did my best" then that applies to me too. My dad did his best with me, and I can say I did my best with my own kids.

News flash again: it's not about me. That's the first lesson we dads should teach our kids.

I'm betting that's how Paul and his companions dealt with the Thessalonians. It's a good bet to assume they worked to be selfless, to be caring and patient and loving with these new friends. Unless they were those things, it would be difficult at best to encourage, comfort, and urge the Thessalonians to live Godly lives. Only someone who's living selflessly and teaching selflessly can really impart those Christ-like qualities to the people they love.

In other words, Paul and his friends acted like dads. Like the men Jesus wanted them to be.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for being my Maker, my friend, my Savior, but my brother. Thank You for letting me be a dad. Always help me to do my best for You and others.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 1 March 2018

*And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. 1 Thessalonians 2:13 (NIV).*

If a Dad's number one job is to introduce his kids to Jesus, here's the biggest reason why. God's word, through the Spirit of Jesus, works in us every day. God's word is at work in those who believe in Him, reshaping thinking and remolding hearts. God's word is at work, too, in the lives of those who reject Him, because He still provides everything even for them. Indeed, God's very nature is revealed in nature itself, the world He created for His glory and our livelihood.

To recognize God's provision, dads are also responsible for teaching their kids how to be thankful. The apostle Paul began many of his writings by expressing thankfulness for the recipients of his letters. It's something he learned was part of following Jesus because one can't follow the Savior of love without being thankful for His love. Being thankful is central to living out one's Christ-walk.

We fathers are responsible for teaching our kids many important lessons. An introduction to Christ, how to be independent, how to think for yourself, how to persevere, the character in a man of integrity; how to fish, how to selectively hear during your favorite TV show, how to say "back in the day" like you know what you're talking about: these are all supposed to be "important" things.

But all kidding aside, the most important thing we can teach our kids, next to introducing them to Jesus, is to be thankful like Him. Jesus continually gave thanks for His friends, for food, for everything. Paul later modeled that for the churches he mentored as he worked to live out Christ's calling.

You know we should do the same. You and I both know people who seem ungrateful, who walk around with a little black rain cloud hovering over their heads, who seem to want happiness but fail to realize that the only real happiness in the world is found on a walk with Christ. Those people matter; they're our family and friends. The first, best thing we can and must do for them is be thankful. We should be thankful for them, thankful for our lives, thankful for every breath God gives us. If we emulate this Christ-like thankfulness, there's a better than average chance it'll rub off.

It starts with you and me. Today, every chance we can, let's remember to thank God for everything we can think of. Thank other people for even the smallest of things. Before you know it, things inside of you will start to change.

For further reading: Psalm 8:3-4, Romans 1:8, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Thessalonians 2:14.

*Lord, thank You for providing, for all You do. Help me to model this for others.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 2 March 2018

*For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last. 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 (NIV).*

Oh wow...so much to unpack. Let's not let ourselves get wrapped around some concepts that aren't easily understood. Instead, let's speak plainly: Paul isn't being anti-Semitic. He isn't 'hating' on all Jews, but is rightfully condemning those with ungodly intentions. In doing so, he denounces all sinners. The people who were the subject of his remarks were, of course, the Jewish priests who both crucified Jesus and then persecuted His followers. But one cannot read Paul's words of love in this and other books and conclude that he was anti-Semitic or advocated anti-Semitism. Paul didn't hate the Jews: he hated that they were antagonistic to Christ. In some ways, he probably hated that he had once been part of that persecution.

In these verses today, Paul is reminding us that those who turn their backs on God displease Him. They are hostile to believers and whatever believers say and do. In their doing this, they are heaping up sin after sin on themselves, not just for their self-focused lives or meanness to others but because these things are meanness and sin against God. In doing this, they are incurring the wrath of God, namely damnation. They separate themselves from Jesus, possibly for eternity. This is by choice, not because anyone forced them. It's not on God: it's on them. As C.S. Lewis once said, the gates of hell are locked from the inside.

Saying "I believe in Jesus" sets you apart in this world, and it paints a target on your back. People who don't believe will separate themselves from you even as you separate yourselves from unbelieving behaviors (if not unbelieving people). Your "illogical" acceptance of the supernatural will set you against anyone who embraces the easy path of believing other things. The "establishment" doesn't believe what you do, and they will come after you. Plain speaking about matters of the heart can become common sense to you as you see that there is no real love apart from the love of Christ.

Paul experienced these things just as we do. When he called out his fellow Jews for murdering the Christ, he was persecuted. History has labeled him an anti-Semite for doing this. It simply isn't true.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:6, Galatians 1:22, Acts 17:5, Luke 24:20, Acts 2:23, Acts 13:45, Matthew 23:23, 1 Thessalonians 2:15.

*Lord, always remind me to never hate people You love.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 5 March 2018

*But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. 1 Thessalonians 2:17-18 (NIV).*

Satan played a large role in my weekend. Maybe not the way you're thinking, although I'm the worst of sinners I know.

On Saturday my wife and I attended "The Thorn" along with friends. If you've never seen it, The Thorn is a Christian stage production telling the story of the Passion in music, narrative and dance. We really enjoyed the show, and my wife and I agreed: the most interesting character in the show was Satan. The actor/dancer who portrayed him did so in a slinky, sly, debauched way. He looked evil, he acted evil, and every time he was on stage he was bathed in angry red light. In a word: memorable.

Then, yesterday, the main subject of the sermon at church was telling Satan to go away. Pastor Mark even called up my wife, who spent all her years in school playing softball, to play umpire and yell "YOU'RE OUTTA HERE!" Message me, I have video. Anyway, the gist of the message was that we have full power to tell Satan to take a hike whenever he threatens, cajoles, intimidates, manipulates, or generally gets on our nerves and tries to separate us from God. "Devil" even means "divide," something I didn't know until yesterday. Yet throughout history, Satan has made dividing us his number one job. It's how he garners power, how he tries and tries and tries – and fails – to take God's place as, well, God.

Satan is that slinky divider and he always has been. There's nothing cool or hip or edgy about Satan or darkness or evil. He always brings destruction when he shows up in front of you. He always tries to block your way, blocking your view of God because if he can wedge a divide between you and God, he can win the moment...

...even as he's already lost the war. The end of all things has already been foretold. God wins; love prevails; truth and justice and peace rule eternity because God is and always will be God in His heaven. You'd think Satan would have learned that message already but it's not so. He's still dividing us, still trying to block our way from being united with Jesus. On your own you can't defeat him and he will block your way. Through the name of Jesus, though, you can't lose.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 5:3, Colossians 2:5, 1 Thessalonians 3:10, Isaiah 62:3, Philippians 4:1, 2 Corinthians 1:14, Matthew 16:27, Luke 17:30 1 Thessalonians 2:19.

*Lord, stand between me and Satan. I pray, defend me, never leave me, forgive me when I sin against You, and fight the divider for Your glory.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 6 March 2018

*For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 (NIV).*

In the last two verses, Paul talked about how Satan kept him from visiting the Thessalonians. Here he talks about why he wanted to visit them. It's simple, actually.

Have you ever been really, really proud of someone? Maybe a child who has graduated, or your baby the first time they walked? Have you ever led a team through completing a difficult task? Have you ever been part of something that you really loved, and seen it through to the end? Maybe you got a taste of what Paul felt. But, no, it wasn't just pride.

Have you ever been caught up in the moment and felt so glad to simply be alive? Or have you ever felt so moved, so overwhelmed with feeling that you could barely contain it when you realized how you felt? Have you ever...have you ever. We could go on and on here. Like I said, it's really quite simple.

What is our hope, our sure-fire promise? What is our joy, that incomparable quality of godliness? What is the crown, the reward and symbol of majesty, honor and power? How, who and what is Jesus Christ if not all these things and more? You know: it is Him. Quite simply, it is the love of Jesus Christ that surpasses all understanding and breathes life into lifelessness.

I can honestly say some of my proudest accomplishments in life come from knowing I have been privileged to lead a few souls to Christ. Not many, but a few. They're a few people who will spend eternity with Jesus, alive and celebrating in heaven in the presence of Him who loved them first. They won't be ones who spend that same eternity in hell with Satan, who knew Jesus but rejected Him out of their pride, which can be hate; that same Satan who still divides people today, putting up wedges and walls between people and their God.

No, the folks who have come to faith with my words and actions make me proud. And humbled. I'm the worst of sinners, yet somehow they came to believe in Jesus, the ultimate love in the universe, through sinful me. That's an overpowering feeling, an overwhelming honor for such and under-whelming man. Why would I feel so overwhelmed? It's simple: it's Jesus, His love. It's the love of Jesus, shared between people who love Him back. It's what Paul felt for the Thessalonians. Have you ever?

For further reading: 2 Corinthians 1:14, 1 John 2:28, Thessalonians 3:1.

*Lord, the greatest honor in my life is to follow You. Thank You for using me, your servant, to carry your message. I pray, use others around me to do the same.*



## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 7 March 2018

*So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 1 Thessalonians 3:1 (NIV).*

This and coming verses explain that Paul loved the Thessalonians. In context of chapter 2, it's obvious he did. That's not an ordinary thing. I find myself here in San Francisco this week not knowing how to react to the homeless. I've been to SF many times but I've never seen as many homeless people here as there are this year. What's more, the city appears to be doing less and less to address the situation of so many folks needing genuine help. Many are drug-dependent; many appear disturbed; many need help with money, food, hygiene, and health issues. Our society tells us that we should be wary of such strangers. Jesus (and probably Paul) wouldn't have hesitated to help but Dave does. What can you do to help someone who is in such desperate straits?

If nothing else, pray. I don't know the strangers I pass on the street, and the people who yell and scream out of the blue for no reason, or the guy kissing the magazine on the subway give compelling reasons to be apprehensive at least. But I pray for them. I pray for them, and I pray God opens my path and my heart to find a way to help. Until then, I pray. Pray for health, pray for peace, pray for safety, pray for food and shelter and assistance. Jesus and Paul would probably do more; I pray, too, that God would enable me to do the same.

So, riddle me this Dave: how does "best to be left by ourselves in Athens" demonstrate Paul's love for anyone but Paul? Did Paul only pray for them? I think the key is in the first words of the chapter coupled with the last words of Chapter 2. Recall that 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 said "For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy." Paul says those things then immediately intimates that he was left alone in Athens because he loved the Thessalonians, whose love in Christ was Paul's pride and joy. He was left alone in Athens because he sent his friends Silas and Timothy to other places to love on other people, including the Thessalonians.

I bet that Paul's first inclination was to pray for his new friends and the other strangers in their midst. When you can't do anything else because of distance, ability or even fear, you and I can pray because prayer is a real, tangible way to be involved. And in it, you're never alone.

For further reading: Acts 17:15, Thessalonians 3:2.

*Lord Jesus, show me ways I can help. Show me people I can pray for and help.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 9 March 2018

*We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. 1 Thessalonians 3:2-3 (NIV).*

Are we destined for trouble? Answer: yes. Does that mean God is indifferent or not present? Answer: no. Gee, those easy answers couldn't be more difficult.

"Life is hard. It's harder if you're stupid." That's a meme supposedly quoting John Wayne. No disrespect intended to the Duke (who, nearly 40 years after his death, is still my favorite actor) but we're all stupid. Stupidity is a symptom of sin; bad choices yielding more bad choices is symptomatic of sin starting off the whole process. And our choices do largely determine our outcome. Bad choices are almost guaranteed to make hard times even harder. Don't believe me? Ask anyone who's gotten into crime, or drugs, or adultery, or a web of lies. Stupidity only makes things worse.

Sometimes it seems like that's all we're destined for, as if God has it in for us. As if God has abandoned us. Depression entrenches that impression; so do negativity, exhaustion, anger, and pain. Yet, if you think God does indeed have it in for us, that He sets things in motion but then takes a hands-off approach as we live, how do you explain Him constantly sustaining us in life? How do you explain the feeling of release that comes from compassion, or forgiveness? How can we not see that it is the hand of Jesus at work in our lives when we act out in ways that demonstrate His love, His patience, His empathy, His heart?

Paul was lonely in Athens, and Athens was a hostile place for a follower of this new belief system called "Christianity." Think of it as the San Francisco of its day, but with a better appreciation for democracy yet having poorer standards of sanitation. It would have been tough to endure, even for a gifted spirit like Paul. Yet he sent his friend Timothy to Thessalonica because Thessalonica needed Timothy more. That wasn't just Paul being pragmatic or realistic: it was the heart of Jesus at work in him, causing Paul to act in ways that edified and encouraged others. Paul knew he could expect trouble, especially when his 'forces' were separated and divided. Yet he knew God would provide, that God would be with him, that even when troubles seemed destined, God would work in him to help him endure, persevere, and build hope.

We're no different. Life is harder when we're stupid; Paul did stupid things, too. But Paul trusted Christ implicitly and that allowed him to move beyond adversity and into the realm of miracles called "faith." I think the Duke would agree.

For further reading: Romans 5:3-5, Thessalonians 3:4.

*Lord, help me to rely more on you, to overcome adversity.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 12 March 2018

*In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. 1 Thessalonians 3:4(NIV).*

This is a theme we've talked about here many times before: when you believe in Jesus, you will be persecuted. You'll lose friends. You'll become alienated from family. You may lose your job, your home. If you become a believer in Jesus and you expect your life to be peaches and cream, brother (or sister), you need to be prepared. Jesus Himself told His disciples – and us – that those who hate you hated Him first. That those who follow Him will be persecuted but also blessed. Paul spoke squarely with his friends. He didn't varnish this truth for them, he didn't downplay it. When you care about someone, you speak the truth to them, and Paul spoke Jesus' truth.

Put yourself in first century Asia Minor and consider how they might have viewed things. You have befriended a renegade in this man Paul. You know his past, that he was once a Jewish Pharisee who, himself, violently persecuted followers of this Jesus. In listening to him you know him to be a learned man, a man well-versed in the words of the Pentateuch, and the hymns of David, and the accounts of the prophets. You have been told how he oversaw the murder of Stephen, one of Jesus' early followers. You have heard his account of how Jesus met him on a road to Damascus and transformed his life. You know how he is in conflict with the leaders of the local synagogue (all synagogues in fact) as well as the local government authorities, representatives from Rome and Athens both, and that he is an argumentative though persuasive firebrand. And you have seen the look in his eyes, the look that combines determination, regret, peace, and something else that you can't quite nail down. Whatever it is that gives Paul that look, you want it for your own life.

To get that look means you have some serious choices to make. The people around you insult this new sect, deriding it as lunatic fantasy. A man walking around after he was dead? The Messiah murdered by the people He came to save? Love your enemies when your enemies want you dead? Yet there's something about Paul's words, something about the peace of this Jesus, that is calling to you, speaking to you in a place deep inside all you know to be true. In a world where we seem destined for pain and trouble, the words of Jesus, told by this eccentric tentmaker, talk to the very core of your being. To accept them means turning your back on everything you've ever known and that carries great risk.

My friend, in 2000 years, what has changed?

For further reading: John 15:18, Luke 6:22, 2 Timothy 3:12, 1 Thessalonians 3:5.

*My Lord, I will follow You no matter the cost.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 13 March 2018

*In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain. 1 Thessalonians 3:4-5 (NIV).*

Several verses are mentioned below to help explain these for today. Perhaps, however, they are best explained in Mark 4, which is the parable of the sower. If you'll remember, Jesus is teaching a crowd so large that it forces him to stand in a boat to speak to them. He tells them a story of what the kingdom of God is like. It's like when a farmer sows seed and we are the soil. In some of us, the plant grows shallow and it withers, or it is destroyed, or it is neglected to be choked out by weeds, which are troubles in life. But in some of us the seed finds good soil and the seed takes root to eventually produce a good crop.

Paul was concerned that he had planted God's word – good seed – in soil where the troubles of this world had choked out a good crop. He was afraid that Satan had come to distract the Thessalonians and pull them off the straight and narrow path that Paul had set them on.

You know that happens to all of us, right? Billy Graham was one of the modern heroes of the faith, but the tempter tempted him all through his long life and tried to pull him off God's path. Mother Theresa was a modern hero of the faith, but the tempter tempted her all through her long life and tried to pull her off God's path. You get the picture. If it can happen to great heroes of the faith, people with strong public faith who gather millions to follow God, it can happen to little old you and me.

When this life is over, even heroes stand before Jesus individually just like anyone else. Paul was concerned for his friends that they would have been led into sin, that the seed he had planted that had grown in good soil had withered. How wonderful it would be to have a friend like Paul, who thought about us this way. How good it is, then, to have friends who are more than just worldly friends but who also are concerned about our spiritual well-being, about how we're walking our walk with Jesus. Do you have someone like that in your life? Do you have a Paul?

For further reading: Mark 4:17, John 16:33, Romans 5:3, 2 Corinthians 1:4, 1 Thessalonians 2:4, 1 Thessalonians 3:6.

*Lord, I praise You for the people you put in my life to support me in faith. Bless and encourage them, and let me be that someone for somebody else, too.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 14 March 2018

*But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. 1 Thessalonians 3:6 (NIV).*

I daydream. A lot. My daydreams are usually about owning a house on the beach, or a house on a lake. Sometimes they're about another trip to Disney, or working in a village in Uganda, or fishing on my favorite lake in Minnesota, or working in my old garden. Mostly, though, they are about being with other people, usually members of my family. When I think about the good times in my life, people I love are always involved.

Knowing that, it's easy to see that Paul was talking about his love for the Thessalonians and how gladdened he was to hear that they missed him. He was uplifted to learn that his new friends there in Thessalonica wanted to see him as much as he wanted to see them. More than that, Paul was heartened to learn that their faith and love, expressed as charity for others, was growing. That the message he had told them about Jesus was growing, that there was love.

It's a beautiful thing to realize you're loved. Have you realized that lately?

I know a few folks who are going through severe marital problems. It looks very much like those problems will lead to divorce, and that's tragic. It's tragic to realize that the person you loved and who loved you no longer does. That another focus has replaced that love in their, and your, life. You put your heart, your time, your life into someone else's heart, time, and life, and it ends up as a wasteland. It's devastating.

I wonder if my friends have realized they're still loved. When depression grabs your heart, it turns everything dark. It's so hard to see that others still love you. That, in the middle of your darkness, the very real life-light of Jesus is still shining for you. If only you could break through the desperate fog that's hiding that light...

...that happens when you're open to hearing good news. Paul heard good news from his protégé, Timothy, that the Thessalonians believed, that the message of Jesus had taken root and was growing. That they missed Paul. When you're feeling lonely, as Paul was, it is good to hear how others remember you. Sometimes it can make all the difference in the world.

That's what I daydream about. The older I get, the more I cherish time with my family and friends because in those times, the love of God is being shared. It's the best thing there is.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 3:7.

*Lord, thank You for times with people I love. Thank You for sharing Your wonderful love through us.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 15 March 2018

*Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. 1 Thessalonians 3:7 (NIV).*

Have you ever thought about the example you set for others?

Stephen Hawking died yesterday. You've probably heard that by now, and how the most brilliant scientist of our age lived his life as a self-avowed atheist. To many believers this means Mr. Hawking is spending his first full day of eternity in hell. Other people I know are, like me, hoping Dr. Hawking saw the truth of the Scriptures just before he died and is embracing Jesus in heaven. Some others I know are angered at anyone insisting we know one way or another. I'd imagine that more than a few atheists, if they truly don't believe in God, shouldn't particularly care.

Me, I'm encouraged when I hear about someone's faith.

It isn't up to you or me to know that Stephen Hawking is burning in hell or celebrating in heaven. That's up to God. So I pray God was merciful to this atheist who said God didn't exist. We're supposed to pray for our enemies, right, and unbelievers or dis-believers are, well, enemies of the faith. Their posture is antithetical to Christ. If we can't pray for those people, especially in their greatest moments of need (like dying) then maybe we need a gut check.

So when I hear that there are people in the world who prayed for Dr. Hawking and others like him, I'm encouraged by that. I'm encouraged to hear about my friend in Uganda who ministers to multiple congregations by both his formal ministry as well as through the way he teaches young people how to farm and garden. I'm encouraged when I think about all the people who celebrated faith not when Stephen Hawking died but, instead, when Billy Graham died a few weeks ago. I'm encouraged when I meet new people at church who I haven't seen there before. And I'm encouraged to teach my grandkids how to say their prayers at night just before they go to sleep.

Because the ways I act concerning these things are examples I set for others. Other people, like atheists and new followers and grandkids, are watching how I, as a follower of Jesus, act in these times. The Thessalonians watched Paul and changed their lives to more closely resemble his. So it is with us today.

I honestly hope and pray Stephen Hawking changed his extraordinary thinking about the truth of Jesus just before he met Jesus. Scripture is replete with warnings about the eternity of those who reject Christ in this life. I hope Dr. Hawking "saw the light" before he met the Light. It's too grim to think otherwise. One day we'll each find out.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 3:8.

*Lord, have mercy on those who are dying without believing in You. I pray, change their hearts now. Use my life as a tool to help do that*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 22 March 2018

*For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? 1 Thessalonians 3:8-9 (NIV).*

I don't know all the people who have come to faith or been encouraged in faith because of me; some day, in heaven, I'll find out. Perhaps there are many; perhaps there are few. Yet, here and now, I'm very encouraged. Occasionally people do message me, thanking me for sharing devotions like these and others. When I see those messages, I'm encouraged. They make me realize that doing these things is doing the right thing. At the same time, they're a great reminder that 'it's not about me.' Life is about using the talents God gives us to help others in their paths to Jesus.

Jeremiah 29:11 says: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Even on days like today, when there is fear, doubt, and struggle in so many things we do, God still has a plan for our lives. That plan isn't to fear and doubt, though sometimes struggle will be involved. But it will be struggle to remain standing firm in the Lord. Through it, we will really live.

Paul knew this. He knew the words of Jeremiah; he had been inculcated in them since he was a boy. Later in life, he had a personal, radical encounter with Jesus, who immediately transformed his entire life. Paul knew God had plans for him and that these plans were to prosper him, to use his talents to bless others. Paul's reward? Thankfulness. Joy; incomparable joy before God because of God because of the faith his friends had.

I don't know what you're going through today. Me, today is going to be a tough day. I have a hunch some big things are coming down in my life today and to be honest they intimidate me. Yet through them, God is still working in me. He has plans for me and they don't involve fear and doubt. They may not even involve ever really knowing how my words and my actions have benefitted others. Yet, no matter what's going on in my world, I do know that God is working through me, like He did through Paul, like He does through you, too. I know that, here and now, I can celebrate in real joy because He has let me share words of faith with you and that's important. Instead of worry, my posture will be to thank Him and ask Him for more. And in this, there is real life.

For further reading: Jeremiah 29:11, 1 Corinthians 16:13, 1 Thessalonians 1:2, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10.

*Lord, thank You for using me to share You with my friends. Help me to do it more.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 27 March 2018

*How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10 (NIV).*

This is Holy Week. Tradition (and Biblegateway.com) say that Monday is the day when Jesus went to the Temple in Jerusalem and scoured it out. Tuesday is the day of Jesus' Olivet discourse, and the day when Judas Iscariot discussed betraying his Master with the Sanhedrin. When you boil it all down, though, we're speculating. The events of Holy Week are well documented in the four Gospels, but 2000 years later we still can't pinpoint exactly some of what happened and at exact times on each of the days. That isn't surprising, since we can't always pinpoint exact times for things that happen in our lives today. It's tough to say, but in reality, the specific dates and times of things, even events from the Bible, are just trivia. If that's all we focus on, we've missed the larger point.

Yet something about this is true whether we know the date and time or not: we can't thank God enough for the joy we have in His presence because of each other, especially now. No matter what's going on, no matter what day of Holy Week it is, no matter what other trivial things cloud up our lives, we can always thank God for the blessing of other people that He moves into our lives.

Why does Paul say what he said? You know the answer: joy. It's because the angels in heaven rejoice when we the people love and live as followers of Jesus. It's because it pleases Jesus to commune with us, and when two or more of us are together in His name He is there. It's because it's a privilege to tell loved ones about this Jesus and this miraculous, wonderful love He has for them. It's because you get to share with other people the news that they're completely forgiven, as forgiven as anyone ever could be, by the God who created them just to love them.

People are a blessing. They folks you argue with on Facebook: blessing. The sister-in-law who's hurting: blessing. The grandkids you love, the ornery boss, the stranger with whom you strike up a conversation, the homeless man you pass by: all blessings. God gives us people in our lives so that we might share the joy of Jesus with them, and then increase His love all the more.

That matters no matter what day of the calendar it is. And it's not a trivial matter.

For further reading: Matthew 18:20, Matthew 21:12-13, John 2:13-22, 1 Thessalonians 3:11.

*Lord, I praise You for the blessing of people in my life. Thank You for blessing me with them, all of them.*



## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 28 March 2018

*Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 1 Thessalonians 3:11 (NIV).*

Paul closes out this chapter of 1 Thessalonians with a three-part benediction; this is the first part. Most benedictions are closing statements, but this one is a prayer, and that isn't unusual for Paul.

Has it ever seemed to you that God closed the way for you to go somewhere, do something? Were you prevented from going some place you desperately wanted to go? Was the money just not there, or the schedule didn't work, or something came up at the last minute? Was Garth Brooks right in singing that it's a good thing to thank God for unanswered prayers?

You know how things are. We think of things we want, we ask God for them, and things don't turn out the way we want. Must be God's fault, right? God had it in for us!

Not quite.

Indeed, when things don't turn out the way we want, it's usually because of us or just the way things happen. If we're to blame, we're to blame. But if things don't happen the way we want, that doesn't mean God is against us, or even that He blocked the way. What it does mean is that different paths present themselves, and that's a good thing. Sometimes they're from God, sometimes not. But they're always opportunities for God. If the path we wanted isn't open, then perhaps God has cleared the way for another. That's always a good thing, and it's good to remember that Jesus isn't indifferent in our lives.

Paul believed in a Lord who was real, present, and active. He believed that Jesus participated in human affairs from both afar and within us. This same Jesus had confronted Paul on the road to Damascus, closing one path but opening many others. Jesus did it in person, in Spirit, in real time. Is it any wonder, then, that Paul believed – and demonstrated – how Jesus was personally involved in the affairs of his life? It only follows that Paul would pray for God to open up a path to see his new friends in Thessalonica.

The same is true for us. The same Jesus is still in and through us in everything we do. Two thousand years of time are meaningless to the Christ who involves Himself in our comings and goings right now. He lives through us by moving His Spirit in our minds, hearts and hands. He acts out in kindness, patience, and understanding. He breathes, sees, touches with the senses of those who follow Him. And when it seems like He's closing a path, He almost always opens the way to another. That's no unanswered prayer.

For further reading: Philippians 4:20, 1 Thessalonians 3:12.

*My Lord, I praise and thank You for living in me, for living out through me.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 29 March 2018, Maundy Thursday

*May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 1 Thessalonians 3:12 (NIV).*

This is Paul talking about Jesus, about Jesus making the love of the Thessalonians increase and overflow for each other and everyone else. Class dismissed.

But before you go, of course I have a few words. Of course, since it's Maundy Thursday, I'll try to put them in that context.

Put yourself in the upper room that night. You're a helper bringing food in and out. It's a simple dinner, a menu that stretches back centuries. Jesus and his friends, these famous people you've heard about, maybe met, maybe listened to, are here and you're helping them celebrate the holiest night of the year. You bring in lamb, herbs, unleavened bread, wine; you watch them as they say the words and ask the questions that Jews have said and asked most every year since the exodus from Egypt.

The overwhelming emotion in the room seems to be reverent sadness. Given that this is the Passover, that's appropriate. But there's something else afoot there, another emotion at work, something you can't quite pin down but it's moving and it's growing. Jesus is leading His friends in the mystical seder, and talking with them about sad things, about being tortured and persecuted and murdered. He's telling them strange things, speaking about His body and blood, and they are listening intently but don't seem to really understand.

And then He's talking with them about love, about incomparable love. He's talking about God's love. He's telling them to love each other, to serve Him by serving others, to do as He does. Jesus then stoops down to do the dirtiest job you know of: He washes His friends' feet.

That's when you get a revelation, a light starts to shine in your head. "He loves them." That's a pretty obvious thought, but it's miraculous. He really, truly, fully loves these people the way only God does. Jesus is talking the talk and walking the walk by both demonstrating and speaking of His love. His love is expressed in everything He's doing, and He's serving them in ways you don't expect God would. But Jesus is doing it anyway and what He's doing is inspiring, deeply moving, selfless and perfect. Jesus is showing them, and you, the kind of person you want to be. It's life-changing.

And it happened on Maundy Thursday. That kind of love is what Paul was talking about, the love Jesus would inspire and grow in the hearts of the Thessalonians. It's the kind of love that would make a wandering missionary long to see his friends. It's the kind of love that changes hearts, attitudes, and lives, both then and now. It's for you.

For further reading: Matthew 26:17-35, Mark 14:12-31, Luke 22:7-38, John 13:1-17:26, 1 Thessalonians 3:13.

*Lord, all praise to You for Your love, for the lessons You taught on Maundy Thursday.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, Good Friday, 30 March 2018.

*May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. 1 Thessalonians 3:13 (NIV).*

Since it's Good Friday, before you remember that "it is finished," I'm going to lay some bad news on you that you probably won't want to hear.

You aren't good enough.

You, me, Pope Francis, Roseanne Barr, David Hogg, Franklin Graham, anyone else you can think of: on our own we are damned. Not just damned dirty dogs, damned dirty sinners, damned old curmudgeons, but really damned. Eternally separated from God forever. On our own, we have thought, said, and done things that put an abyss between the love of Jesus that declared "it is finished" and where we're standing now.

When we try to do good things for other people because people are inherently good, we're damned. When we feel remorse for things we've done because that's what you should feel, we're damned. When...when...when: the list goes on. We cherish self-reliance, and against the face of a hostile world, those behaviors seem good. They bring out the best in us. But on their own, they're the path to eternal damnation. You and I are still in one place and Jesus, the Light of the world and eternal love, is in another. Accept it: without Jesus, you're damned, stuck. Whatever hell is, whether it's fire, pain, torture, or even just permanent emotional distress, it's the best you can hope for. Reject the love of Jesus and that's your present and your future. You aren't good enough.

Face it, damned friend, you need help.

Good Friday is all about that help. Good Friday is the reason Paul confidently gave this benediction to friends he knew would understand it. Good Friday is the reason he knew, and we can know, that we can be blameless and holy in the presence of God. Without Good Friday, we're damned in front of God, and it's a fearful thing to stand there in that condition. With Good Friday, all is forgiven; everything. My cheating and lying, your rebellion and hatred, the judgmentalism we thrust on strangers, the anger and the murder and the adultery and the idolatry are ALL forgiven. None of them will earn us the reward of hell. Because of Good Friday Jesus said, "it is finished." His death is the defining moment in all of human history, and it makes the difference in this world and the next. Forever.

You and I are never good enough on our own. We desperately need God to intervene in our lives and make things right. On the cross, Jesus did just that. He, who really is good enough, did it today, on Good Friday. On its own, Friday is just another day. What Jesus did made you, and this holiday, more than good enough.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:1.

*Lord, thanks for Your death, for Your life, for Your forgiveness.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 2 April 2018

*As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. 1 Thessalonians 4:1 (NIV).*

Happy day after Easter, my friend. I have a confession to make: this Easter is the first one in a long time when I feel that, well, everything is cool. We had a meaningful celebration of the death and resurrection of the Lord, and I got to hear Him say some things to me that I needed to hear. I spoke back to Him, and, as He does, He responded by loading some peace onto my heart. Everything is good. No, the stresses of the world haven't gone away. Yes, calamity could (and may) rush into my life at any time. Yes, I'm very much still a work in progress in walking my walk of faith with Jesus. Yes, I still struggle with being a hypocrite and a judgmental jerk. All that's true, and it's cool. Through Him, I know I can do better. I know my Lord has my back.

He told me through words like Paul's how He wants me to live out the life He gave me. It's as if He's saying "Follow me and do what I do, live as I live." Listen, learn, understand, forgive; empathize, believe, help those who are afflicted, spend time with Me every day. I'm working on those things and what improvements happen through me are glory to God who deserves the credit. Paul's words taught me these things. So did my wife, my parents, my kids and friends, my pastors and mentors.

They're valuable lessons, you know, because it's still a damn hard world we're in. When Jesus rose on that Easter Sunday, He didn't wipe out all things and start with a clean slate (even though, in a way, He did). No, He equipped His followers to stand in the world and tell others of His peace, His justice, His mercy, His love. That's what Paul had passed on to the Thessalonians: equipment for following Jesus and succeeding in Him. The mark of a successful believer is that other people see the attitudes of Jesus showing through what they say and do.

And that's why I feel things are cool. For the first time in a long time, I get it. It's a gift, and I'm not worthy of it, but He gave it to me anyway because He made me worthy. On my own, I wasn't good enough. Through Him, everything is always so much more than good.

For further reading: 2 Corinthians 13:11, 2 Thessalonians 3:1, Ephesians 4:1, 2 Corinthians 5:9, 1 Thessalonians 4:2.

*Lord, I thank You for Your resurrecting, for Your love in my life, for equipping me to follow You. Help me to do Your will for others.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 3 April 2018

*For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 4:1 (NIV).*

Let's be real: this verse sounds like a parent calling you out. "Don't make me say it again!" Or your mom calls you by your middle name; "DAVID LEE COME HERE RIGHT NOW!" We know Paul was the man who met Jesus on the road into Syria, and we know Jesus instituted a personal ministry into Paul. Now here's Paul saying he didn't just say the things he did by his own authority but, instead, BY THE AUTHORITY OF THE LORD JESUS.

Throwdown, baby. But not really.

Here's a mind-blower: you have that same authority. When you speak from your follower's heart, you're speaking with the authority of the Lord Jesus. When you tell what you believe, you're speaking in the Lord Jesus. When you follow Jesus, you speak with His authority. When you say, "yeah, I believe in Him," you're standing up for Him and He's speaking through you. What will you do with that? Perhaps a better question would be "what will it do with you?"

Face it: this faith-walk thing can be crazy. Up and down struggles, hypocrisy with overflowing blessings and gratitude for things you don't deserve, real peace with real conflict: being a believer in Jesus is the most real thing you can do. And what are the instructions Jesus gives us through men and women like Paul? Love the Lord you God with all your heart and all your mind. When you've done that, repeat, then love your neighbor (i.e. everyone else) the same way.

Simple, right?

I bet the Thessalonians struggled with doing it. We do; we probably aren't much different from them, at least not temperamentally. So Paul reminded them that he taught them the ways of Jesus by Jesus' own authority. It came straight from the top. He spoke with wisdom and power and grace: just like Jesus would. But the Thessalonians were like us, and we're like Paul. We're sinners, and we constantly need Jesus' re-affirming wisdom, power and grace. We need reminders to love God with all our hearts and minds; we need constant reminders to love each other with that same devotion. When you fall down, when you slip into old habits, when you're just having a rough day, you and I need reminders that Jesus is still living in us, speaking through us. That we still speak and act in His authority. Those reminders help us break through the fog and get back up when we've been knocked down.

So maybe it's a more than good thing to hear my parents calling me out.

For further reading: Luke 10:27, 1 Thessalonians 4:3.

*Lord Jesus, speak through me today. Speak Your authority over my words and actions, and help me to do Your bidding where I am today.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 5 April 2018

*It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 (NIV).*

Buckle up, my friend. It's gonna be bumpy for the next few days because Paul is saying, with the authority of Jesus, some uncomfortable things. He's speaking in love, but he's saying things that are unpopular, things we don't want to hear. They're convicting, and you might be convicted. Your first impulse might be offense, or even anger, so buckle up and stay on the ride because it's worthwhile.

One of the dangers of "chunking down" Bible verses is taking them out of context. It's a dangerous thing to randomly pick a verse, read it, and draw huge conclusions from it even though every verse in Scripture is God's real word. So, here, it's wise to remember that, in many of Paul's letters, he reminds his friends to flee from sexual immorality. Run away when you're tempted. Sexual purity is a theme in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon (just to name a few), and anyone who has remotely heard of Genesis has heard of Sodom and Gomorrah: the ultimate lesson on sexual immorality.

Every ancient culture except Israel focused in one way or another on sex, including idolatry of sex, sexual activities, or fertility. When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he wrote to people familiar with Eros, Aphrodite, and the lascivious practices of Roman worship. He reminded them that Christ gave Himself as the bridegroom for His bride, the church. Is it surprising, then, that God asked His bride to be virginally pure for that Bridegroom?

How do you think that worked out for the Thessalonians?

They were people just like us. They thought about and focused on sex as much as we do. They had emotions and sexual needs. Paul cautioned them that they were to be sanctified, set apart and consecrated as holy. The first way to do that was by changing their behaviors on sex. Commit to monogamy; end adultery; save your sexual activity for your marriage; retrain your brain from thinking about sex and lust and the idolatry of it. Let Jesus do work His way in you. Paul's command is to revere faith in Him and the gift of life He gave, and it's awful hard to revere Christ when you're (literally) screwing around with someone.

I've spent a lot of my life cherishing sex, even worshipping it. I've misused it and that caused problems for me and others. Paul is speaking to me here, cautioning me that Jesus beckons me to a better way. Thank God He did this because you and I need His help if we are going to master this emotional, biological and even spiritual drive in our lives in a world determined to misuse it.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 7:2-9, 1 Thessalonians 4:3.

*Lord, forgive me for the ways I've misused Your gift of sex. Help me to revere You through my sex life.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 9 April 2018

*It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 (NIV).*

Let's hone in on ideas that are key to understanding sexuality. It is God's will that we be made holy. It is God's will that we avoid sexual sins. It is God's will that we each learn to control our biological sexuality. It is God's will that we continue to know Him in this way. God wills that we use sex in Godly ways.

Re-read the verses, then please re-read my take on them because these verses put the world at our feet. I'll go further: they make our mastery of any addiction possible. What God wills in this world cannot be denied.

I've said it before: I worshipped sex. It's part of the reason why I spent so much time in affairs. It was immaturity and sin. I put sex on a pedestal, mistakenly judging it as the ultimate expression of love in a relationship. Over time, I came to see it as just something you do when you're with someone. I bought into the cheap grace of our society and turned a blind eye to the damage my selfish views did to other people. My wife paid for it. My kids paid for it. My friends, my church, my co-workers, even 'the other women' paid for my selfishness.

And that's part of the sin delusion, you see. It's not about me. It's about Jesus. I didn't, we didn't pay for my selfishness: Jesus did. He paid for ALL of it, including the guilt, the nagging regrets, and the emotional regurgitation every time my pet sins nag at my psyche.

The key to getting back on the straight and narrow was Jesus. Without understanding that He and only He had done EVERYTHING I ever needed to change, I would still be mired in my immaturity and adultery. And let's be clear: being in line with Jesus opens you to more of Satan's attacks. He still tempts, he still tries. You need to resist in Christ.

Paul was teaching his friends that God willed for them to be sexually faithful, sexually pure, and humanly capable of mastering the same biological and emotional drives that face us now. It was God's will, God's plan, God's determination that His people not be plagued by these attacks, that they revere Him in sex. If you're suffering, then there's hope for you. The first step in your recovery is going to Jesus and submitting to Him taking control. What Jesus wills for you won't be denied. Without taking that step, you're stuck.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:6.

*Lord Jesus, empower Yourself through me to control my sexuality. Help me to worship You through this gift.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 10 April 2018

*...and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. 1 Thessalonians 4:6 (NIV).*

In this verse, Paul is specifically talking about sex but you can easily extrapolate the verse to apply to all sin. You'll recall that the first verses of 1 Thessalonians 4 called the Thessalonians to live sexually pure lives, to use the gift of sex in Godly ways that will glorify Him. Then comes this verse that identifies one of the chief effects of our sins, whether they're adultery or murder. It begs an obvious question.

How do you imagine our choices affect each other?

If I speed past you in my car, I've affected you, probably made you mad. If you open the door for a stranger at Target, you've affected them, probably pleasing them. If your child colors nice pictures all over your yearbook, they have affected you, and I won't speculate how you feel about it. You get the picture. Things we say and do affect each other.

Imagine how you'd feel if someone slept with your spouse. Imagine how you'd feel if someone you loved had knowingly conspired to deceive you about some terrible thing that cut to the heart of your relationship. Imagine the betrayal and hurt.

Imagine how all these things must grieve Jesus, who showed us his better, most excellent way. Do you think He sometimes feels betrayed by our sins? I imagine He must, so thank God for His holy Spirit of forgiveness.

Leviticus 25 said it best: "Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the Lord your God." Here, fear of God is both respect and dread. God spoke those words through Moses over a thousand years before Paul. He said them to tell His people that He wanted them to revere Him by revering each other. Treat each other with respect, kindness, and deference. Part of that involves recognizing where we shouldn't wrong each other. Don't speed by each other on the road. Don't hold grudges. Don't bed your neighbor's spouse. And remember that God is watching.

These commands weren't given because God is a killjoy who doesn't understand sex. They were given to us as a reflection of His love, as a way to teach us how to put loving boundaries around our behavior so that others might love God fully too. Faith in Jesus is an adventure in loving Him by living life. The only "don'ts" in Christianity involve things that can hurt us in some way. In this verse, God cautions that, while we hurt each other, He is aware...and "woke." There is a better way.

Perhaps Paul might agree. Imagine that.

For further reading: Leviticus 25:17, 1 Corinthians 6:8, Deuteronomy 32:35, Psalm 94:1, 1 Corinthians 12:32, 1 Thessalonians 4:7.

*Lord, teach me to better follow You, reflect You, honor You.*



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## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 11 April 2018

*For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. 1 Thessalonians 4:7 (NIV).*

God is setting us up for failure. God is setting a standard we can't achieve. God is telling us to do something that's impossible for us. On one hand, God is telling us to live holy lives and, on the other hand, He knows we're sinful and can't do that, so it's unfair.

Yes on all counts. With God all things are possible.

God asks us, commands us, to be holy because He is holy. That's straight out of Leviticus, reiterated here, and confirmed yet again in 1 Peter. In fact, it's mentioned over and over throughout both Testaments that we are to be holy as God is holy. You and I, though, we're sinners. Holy is out of reach. It seems unfair, then, for God to stipulate that we are to be holy if we are to be with Him.

Or is it?

The fact is that God made 'holy' attainable. Fact is, Jesus made you holy by His death. His last gasp was the last gasp of your unholiness. The second He died it became possible for you to be holy again, like Adam was before he chomped down on the fruit. Christ wiped away every hint of unholiness from your soul and made you right again in His sight.

He said it was possible because He was God and with God all things are possible.

So, yes, God allows us to fail because we're sinners in a sinful world, but we're holy because of Him. God sets the highest standard possible for us that we can't achieve on our own but he makes it achievable because of Himself. God knows it's impossible for us to do anything without Him, so He makes His Calvary sacrifice available to us free of charge. God commands us to be holy because He made it so we can be. All it takes, then, is for us to believe.

Whenever I have a bad day, or when I feel pressured to get things done, or when I feel out of my element, I get to see that God has done everything necessary for me to be holy again. I was unholy for such a long time; I'm unholy in my choices every day. Yet all it takes is a thought of the cross and we get to realize how puny our sins really are against all Jesus did. You and I get to realize that Jesus Himself made it possible for us to succeed, to win, to do the possible, to be holy.

That, too, is a yes on all counts.

For further reading: Matthew 19:26, Leviticus 11:44, 1 Peter 1:15, 1 Thessalonians 4:8.

*Lord, thank You for making me holy because of Your Son. Thank You for opening a holy eternity and a holy life now through Him.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 16 April 2018

*Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit. 1 Thessalonians 4:8 (NIV).*

Do atheists go to hell? And what about suicides: do people who commit suicide go to hell?

Let's get the bad news out of the way: if atheists say they don't believe, actively reject believing in Jesus, then, yes, they are rejecting God Himself and absorb those consequences now. Pascal's wager plays out: if you believe in God and He exists, or you believe in God and He doesn't exist, or you don't believe in God and He doesn't exist, you are rationally better off than if you don't believe in God and He does exist. God offers the proof of His existence in many ways and it's not only irrational and illogical to actively disbelieve in the miracles of nature, but it's spiritually dangerous. Jesus came to build relationships with every person, especially folks who don't know Him or deny Him. If any of us rejects the offering of salvation from Him, they do so at their own peril.

Ditto you and I with our pride because, let's be real: neither you nor I know other peoples' hearts. It isn't our place to judge the heart. Only God can know whether someone truly shuns Him or only claim to reject Him but secretly don't. Perhaps the best we can say in the matter is to simply say "we don't know but the Bible says" and leave it at that. Woe to the man who rejects the Son of Man. Woe, too, to the man who judges the man who rejected Jesus.

What about suicides? What about people who reject God's ultimate gift of life by ending it themselves? Same answer: the best we can say is "I don't know." Nowhere in the Bible does it say people who commit suicide are damned. We could what-if the situation endlessly and still be left at the conclusion of saying it's really up to God because only God knows the heart. If someone rejects life, perhaps they are rejecting God; that isn't up to me to decide. Who knows a person's last thoughts except God? Perhaps it's a whiff at the question but, in fact, it's above my pay grade.

A called servant of Christ – a pastor, reverend, minister, priest – is someone who received a personal call from God to teach and proclaim Him. Paul reminds us today that those who reject the words of called servants are rejecting God Himself. Yet even called servants are fallible, sinful, human. Only God has the answers we all seek.

For further reading: Ezekiel 36:27, Romans 5:5, 2 Corinthians 1:22, Galatians 4:6, 1 John 3:24, 1 Thessalonians 4:9.

*Lord, I believe in You. Help my un-belief. Help those who don't know you, or are hurting to the agony of death.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 17 April 2018

*Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit. 1 Thessalonians 4:8 (NIV).*

Yesterday we talked about who goes to hell; do atheists or suicides go to hell? You'll remember that we talked about how we shouldn't try to judge the heart because only God can – only God has the right to – judge the heart. Remember that idea when we 'go there' today.

In the first part of 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul was talking about sexual sin, about keeping the body of Christ sexually pure. It only makes sense that, if we as God's church, have God's Holy Spirit living within us, we should want to keep His dwelling place – our hearts, minds and bodies – sexually clean. We want to keep ourselves pure and clean because that Spirit is the soul of God making His home in ours. Foul language? Stop using it. Careless anger? Lay it down at the Cross. Sexual sins, sexual activities that aren't within a marriage? Retrain your brain and walk in a different direction.

We are to do these things because God lives within us. When we say, instead, "I know better," we are denying the presence of God in our lives. We're denying His Spirit and denying the truth of everything He tells us. God gave us the gift of sex to be intensely intimate with another follower of His with whom we've vowed to live and love for all our lives. Sex in this manner is to be a way of worship, a way of being as close as two people can be, joined in a union of intercourse and a communion of a most personal faith. A look, a touch, a few minutes of stolen pleasure throw all this out of whack.

It isn't our place to judge God's intention in all this, only to accept it as 'the way it is.' Yet it's also 'the way it is' by remembering that His Spirit really is in us, really is part of us. Consequently, it isn't our place to judge other people whose morals don't align with our own. It isn't our place because God lives within us. The teenage girl whose skirt is WAAAAY to short: don't judge her. The guy down the hall who gets high every night: don't judge him. The uncle (or father or mother or aunt) whose politics you can't abide: don't judge. We are not to judge each other because that's God's role, God's right. To reassure us that we don't need to usurp Him, the Spirit of Jesus abides in each one of us who follows Him.

Next time you ogle the girl, peruse The Chive, or watch pay TV after midnight, remember these words and remember the Spirit within you.

For further reading: Ezekiel 36:27, Romans 5:5, 2 Corinthians 1:22, Galatians 4:6, 1 John 3:24, 1 Thessalonians 4:9.

Thank You, Lord, for the miracle You give of living in me.

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 18 April 2018

*Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. 1 Thessalonians 4:9 (NIV).*

We who participate in social media would do well to remember this verse. Are you, like me, guilty of not loving your fellow man on Facebook, Twitter, or some other program, especially when they disagree with you? Are you, like me, guilty of forgetting that it was God Himself who taught us how to love each other?

We would do well to emulate the Thessalonians. The Thessalonians took Paul's instruction to heart, listening when he told them how God wanted them to honor Him with their sexuality and their other habits. More than even that, they listened when Paul told them that God wanted them to love each other selflessly, completely, shamelessly. Share with all; care for everyone; listen before speaking; seek understanding; show compassion. Paul taught the Thessalonians to love each other completely the way God loved them.

Yet even better than that, we'd do well to emulate Jesus, who John quoted (in 13:34) as saying "a new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you MUST love one another." It wasn't a request; it wasn't a suggestion: it was a COMMAND. A directive, an order. Jesus didn't do his best R. Lee Ermey (rest in peace, Gunney) and bark out the order. Instead, he gave this command near the end of the Last Supper, the most personal moment of His life. Jesus told His friends that He wanted them to do for others what He had done for them. Love fully, love forgivingly, love from the heart, share the love that God gave them so that others will know it, too. To truly be His followers, this was something they had to do, would feel compelled to do.

Why do this? Jesus knew His Spirit would reside in and live through the lives of His friends. Jesus' Spirit can only live in a welcoming heart, and a welcoming heart can't be welcoming without love. If we love each other, we are living out the fruits of that Spirit, and God will shine through us. Our lives will thrive because of that.

Paul didn't need to write to his friends to remind them of these things. Even in an age of barbarism they knew how to love the way Jesus did. But, if you think about it, WE need to hear this lesson over and over. We need to be reminded of it, clinging to it, and constantly taught how to do it because all too often we forget.

For further reading: Romans 12:10, John 6:45, John 13:34, 1 Thessalonians 4:10.

*My Lord Jesus, I praise You for Your gracious love, Your saving love. Teach me again, today, how to love the way you do for my friends and fellow man.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 19 April 2018

*And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. 1 Thessalonians 4:10-12 (NIV).*

Let's zero in on four words of these three verses because, in our 21<sup>st</sup> century context, they don't mean what they meant when Paul said them: "mind your own business."

When someone says those words to you today, they're telling you off. They're telling you to get lost and get out of THEIR business. That's not what Paul is saying here.

In these verses, Paul is exhorting his friends to live humble lives. Paul is telling the Thessalonians to pay attention to their own lives and be good stewards of them. He's telling them to model Jesus, who was the supreme example of humility. He's telling them to follow his own lead because, when Paul came to a new town, he did two things: he ministered and he worked. Paul was a tentmaker by trade, a man who cut and sewed cloth. More than just that, a tentmaker provided durable, long lasting homes for nomadic peoples of his day. When Paul entered a new town, in addition to teaching in the synagogues and town squares, he sought work with the locals. He found ways to use his physical skills to earn a living and pay his own way. In this way, God provided for Paul and served him as a good example for new believers to follow. Through this, work became worship for all to see.

Paul isn't telling his friends to butt out (although that could be a derivative of his message). Instead, he's reminding them to focus on their livelihoods. Devote yourselves to the work you're given, and do it well. Through that, God would bless them with provision. Doing these things would show others "there's something about those Christians. They are a good example." In this way, reliance on God would look like self-reliance to un-believers and serve as a good lesson no matter who was watching.

The same holds true for us today. Think of the Amish, the hard working and completely self-sufficient community of believers who conduct their lives without modern conveniences. You won't find a more diligent group of believers anywhere. I think the Amish follow Paul's mold very well. And think of what we aim to teach young people: to learn trades, to prepare themselves for living. I would submit that we, like the Amish and Paul, should emphasize more the importance of learning for earning as a way of worshipping God. There can be no more important lesson.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

*Lord, I thank You for blessing me with work!*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 23 April 2018

*Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. 1 Thessalonians 4:13 (NIV).*

In this verse, Paul switches subjects. He moves from living to living again.

You'll recall that Barbara Bush died last week. Her son, President Bush, said that his mother didn't fear death because she had faith in God, faith in the afterlife. Here in Texas, this has been a big story. In fact, I can't remember the press ever making such a big deal about the death of a First Lady, even though Mrs. Bush was indeed extraordinary and famous. Ecology.com says that approximately 151, 600 in the world people die every day. Not to make light of their deaths or Mrs. Bush's, but that means that 909,600 people have died just since Barbara Bush joined their ranks.

I wonder how many of them died with the surety she had about her ultimate destination. The fact is, Mrs. Bush lived in her faith so dying was simply the next part of living. She knew Jesus, so there was no fear of death. I wonder how many of her fellow dead could have said the same thing.

My Pastor will occasionally remind our congregation that we aren't just part of eternity when we die: we're part of it now. Our forever is sealed to be with Jesus by His grace, through His death, in His wisdom, in our world today. We are guaranteed to live with Him forever whether we die now or a century from now. More importantly, what time we have left in this life is guaranteed to be led in His grace, to be inspired by His love, by His forgiveness. The shame, the guilt, the hatred, the ignorance that plagued us before accepting Him is gone. It's as if it never existed forever, and it will never be held against us again, forever. We are citizens of heaven already because Jesus is our savior, God and brother.

Mrs. Bush understood this. I'm hopeful that many who died in this last week also did, though statistically speaking that's unlikely. Paul reminds us that those who precede us in death are with the Lord, awaiting the final day of time, when all who have died will be resurrected. Those who died here believing in the Lord awaiting a destiny much brighter than those who rejected Him. This, the purpose of this life is to give glory to Jesus in how we live it, to use our time here to connect others to Him. To prepare, and to love and forgive as Jesus does. It isn't codes of morality or getting the brass ring. 909600 people, including Mrs. Bush, learned that final truth last week.

For further reading: Romans 11:25, Matthew 9:24, Ephesians 2:12, 1 Thessalonians 4:14.

*Lord, I praise You for the life you give. Help me to live it for You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 2 May 2018

*For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 1 Thessalonians 4:14 (NIV).*

This is the central by-product of the entire Bible. The central fact, the central event, the central purpose of the Bible is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Every verse in the Old and New Testaments testifies to this centrality, specifically the death of Jesus. God's plan for salvation was fulfilled – "It is finished" – in that moment on Calvary when Jesus ceased to breathe. Everything since the fall of Adam and Eve had led up to it, and everything that has happened in history since has happened because of it.

Including the resurrection of the dead. No, of course that hasn't happened yet, but it's coming. Our loved ones who have died believing in this Jesus they haven't seen are coming back. When you and I die in that belief, we're coming back too. Make bank on it. How can you know? Why can you be sure?

Because He died. Because He lived and said He would be killed and that He would rise. Then He died and rose exactly as He said He would. If the central fact of the Bible is the death of Jesus, then the first by-product effect of that is resurrection.

There's more proof of this central fact of history than there are of the 18 missing minutes of Richard Nixon's tapes, what happened on the Grassy Knoll, of Russian collusion, or of what really happened at Roswell. The death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth are better corroborated than the lives or deaths of nearly every ruler in the ancient world, of nearly every celebrity before modern communication, of nearly every professor or bureaucrat who has ever lived. If you say you need proof, there is more proof in the four Gospels of the life of Christ than there is of nearly any other person, alive or dead, in all of human history. That doesn't even count the works of Josephus, Pliny, Tacitus, dozens of Jewish critics, and hundreds of people of the first and second centuries.

Jesus said He was real and it was proven. He also said He would die and rise, and that those who believed in Him would live with Him forever. It was a statement; it was a promise; it was a guarantee. It was proof that His word was 100% reliable in all ways at all times. When Jesus comes back, He will raise the dead who have died believing in Him and we will live with Him forever in a world of wonder that we can't begin to fathom.

Believe it. Believe in it.

For further reading: Romans 14:9, 1 Corinthians 5:3, 2 Corinthians 5:15, 1 Corinthians 15:18, 1 Thessalonians 4:15.

*Lord, I believe You will resurrect me. Thank You for dying the death I deserve, and for promising to bring us all back.*



## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 3 May 2018

*According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 1 Thessalonians 4:15 (NIV).*

This is some tough to interpret theology. I urge you to consult the other referenced verses, and to also remember the context of the verses around this one because Paul is talking here about the resurrection of the dead as a whole, not just specific items within it. If you cherry-pick it, you miss a few things. Why, just last night we were talking at a Bible study about the theme of this verse – the end times – and I made an observation.

I don't care. I'm ready now. The details of what happens aren't as important to me as the fact that they mean Jesus is coming back.

Paul is saying in this verse (and especially in later 1 Thessalonians verses as well as some in 1 Corinthians) that Jesus is going to take all His followers to be with Him in eternity. We're part of that eternity now, and I believe what He said is true. Jesus will come back because He promised to. When He does reappear as He has promised to, it will be the end of time. When that happens, if I'm alive, I'll go to be with Him forever. If I'm already dead, He will raise me and I'll go to be with Him forever in a glorified body that merges my spirit with my perfected flesh. Beyond that, I'm cool with whatever happens.

In fact, I'm so cool with it, I so trust in what He said, that I'm not willing to argue it. If someone wants to work to convince me that their millennial Tribulation-based theology is correct that's fine. It doesn't change what I believe and does neither they nor me any harm. If someone wants to extol to me the virtues of rejecting the millennialist view of the Rapture and all that, well, I don't care because it does neither they nor me any harm. If someone says "I don't know what all that means" then I'm fine with that, too, because to tell you the truth I don't understand it all either.

What I do understand is that this tough theology that Paul mentions is a facet of the promise that Jesus made us to return. He said He's coming back and His word is reliable and true. I believe it. So, even though the details of it are tough to understand, and even though the specifics of it make for some interesting trivia, I'm not worried about them. He's coming back and that's what matters the most.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 1:7, 1 Corinthians 15:52, 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

*Lord, I praise You for Your promise to return and I look forward to it! Use me to encourage others to that same peace.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 4 May 2018

*For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 (NIV).*

Here's the Rapture. Or, if, like me, you don't believe in the Rapture, here's how the story ends...or begins. But let's do ourselves the favor of not getting wrapped up over details. The important part is that the story ends with believers going to live with Jesus forever.

What happens to those who don't believe? You know.

And that's a terrible, tough truth to talk about. ALL people will be resurrected, first those who died in faith in Jesus, then everyone else. And for those who don't believe in Jesus there awaits an eternity without Jesus. He who said He was "the way and the truth and the life" will cast out those who rejected Him (and those things). Imagine an eternity without a way to paradise, or an eternity without truth (but full of lies). Consider forever without life and all the vitality and love that is life.

You know: hell. That's how the story ends for those who claim this whole Jesus thing is nonsense. We get what we choose and those who choose anything but Jesus get their choice. It's not what Jesus wants; it's not what He came for. But Jesus is all love and love respects free will, and we are creatures given free will. If we choose the temporal, temporary pleasure of "I know better" then, when time runs out, Jesus will reluctantly grant the reward of our choice and remove Himself from our lives. Forever. It'll be the start of the worst forever you could imagine.

Yet for those who choose to follow Him, verses 16 and 17 describe the start of a different eternity. It will happen with a shock and the thunderous voice of God and His angels setting things right. Heaven will return to earth and begin to remake what we've undone. He will bring us to Himself, and He will grant us the reward we've chosen in Him. In Him we'll find life, purpose, worship, brotherhood, peace, music, fulfillment, knowledge, harmony. Keep throwing glowing adjectives at it and you get the drift. We're a part of heaven now yet we only know part of it. In that moment, we will see it all.

Whether you believe that comes in a single flash or through the Rapture-initiated great tribulation, the end result is forever with Jesus. That is the only detail that matters.

For further reading: Matthew 16:27, Jude 9, 1 Corinthians 15:23, Revelation 14:13, Acts 1:9, Acts 8:39, 1 Thessalonians 4:18.

*Lord, I so look forward to forever with You!*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 7 May 2018

*Therefore encourage one another with these words. 1 Thessalonians 4:18 (NIV).*

Be ready now. Regarding the Rapture and that whole 7-year Millennialist end times story, it might or might not be true. We might or might not understand how Jesus will bring about the end of all things and begin something totally new. There may be a Rapture where believers are snatched up to heaven in a flash and those 'left behind' get to endure seven years of worsening hell on earth to fulfill prophecy and give them one last chance (actually seven years of last chances) to repent. There may very well be a coming time where an Antichrist rises to earthly power, plagues and woes are unleashed, and the battle of Armageddon is waged to Satan's loss. It could very well happen that, at the end of all this, Jesus will reign as earthly king here for exactly one thousand years, after which this earth will be burned away and something completely new unveiled. All this may be true.

Or it may not be. It may be all wrong. The end may be just one ending, and the words of 1 Thessalonians 4 may be completely germane to how things will happen. It may or may not be that Jesus will come back in the clouds – the way He left – and that this event will be the end. The faithful in Him will be taken to be with Him and the unfaithful rejected and sent away to perdition. The Rapture and the tribulation and the rise and fall of Antichrist may not happen.

We simply don't know. Tim LaHaye didn't know. Your pastor doesn't know. The Pope (or Pope Emeritus) doesn't know. Get the picture?

Be ready now. Be encouraged by this today.

The Bible simply says that Jesus will return and that we should encourage each other with that knowledge. Before He came the first time, at least 4000 years of human history passed. Is it so inconceivable that it would, then, take a very long time for conditions to be made right for the Messiah to re-appear? It isn't up to us to pre-game the thing or know the specifics. All we know is that He said He will be with us in all things until the end of the age and then in person after that. The Bible mentions a great deal of figurative language describing events that happen to herald that. But knowing the hour, day and specifics are only up to God the Father, not us. Is there harm in believing in a Rapture? No. Is it necessary? Perhaps not. We don't know.

What we do know is the ultimate end: that Christ returns. That's it. The lesson? Be ready now. Don't be mired in details. Be at peace with it. THAT is the biggest encouragement of all.

For further reading: Matthew 28:20, Acts 1:7, 1 Thessalonians 5:1.

*Lord, how and when you come back I'm ready to meet You now.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 8 May 2018

*Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 (NIV).*

Paul is re-iterating what we talked about yesterday: we don't know the date and time of Christ's return, only that He will return. It will happen on God's timeline, in a moment the Father has chosen and only He knows. Furthermore, it's ok for us to not know. Jesus Himself said that it wasn't for us to know. That wasn't a rebuke or a "diss:" it was simply stating a fact that it isn't our place as children of God to know all that God the Father is thinking. Not even Jesus Himself, the Son, knew (or knows).

Yet this verse is the best one in the Bible to justify what we've been saying these last few days: be ready now.

Thieves come to steal your things without you knowing. Tornadoes sometimes strike without warning; lightning always does. Stock market crashes happen unpredictably. North Korea is still as wily as it always has been. Toddlers do crazy things without any rhyme or reason. What's the point?

Things happen in an instant, usually without our knowing ahead of time.

So it will be with the end of all things. Whether it happens in a predicted Rapture or in a single moment when all the world will see Jesus in the clouds and bow to acknowledge Him as Lord, it will happen in a flash. We won't know exactly when. We may indeed see signs of it approaching; indeed, the Bible says there will be signs, if we are wise enough to interpret them. They will point to events coming like a storm front on the horizon.

ALL of them will point to one thing and one thing alone: the coming of Christ will happen when God Himself determines, not us. Our only task is to be ready for it.

Be ready now. Get to know Jesus now. Confess to Him; let Him befriend you. Talk with Him. Cry to Him. Be angry to Him, scream at Him, open your heart and dearest soul to Him, be "real" with Jesus. Do it now, to claim your place in heaven now. He already has it ready for you, and He already knows what's on your heart. Jesus doesn't want you to be forced to come to him, compelled like a slave under threat of the whip; that's not how love goes. Jesus wants you to come to Him willingly, as a brother, sister, friend, and penitent. Everything that needs to be done to wipe out your guilt and your sin has already been done. He simply wants you to see it, and then see Him.

Do it now. Be ready now.

For further reading: Acts 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:3.

*I'm ready to meet You now, Lord Jesus. Come soon.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 9 May 2018

*While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. 1 Thessalonians 5:3 (NIV).*

"I see a bad moon rising. I see trouble on the way." Creedence Clearwater Revival and that describes our complacency as the end of time approaches.

Have you been following the volcanic eruption in Hawaii? I've been fascinated with volcanoes since I was a boy, and I'm even more fascinated with this one because my wife and I are supposed to see that volcano in August. It's an awesomely powerful thing to watch the earth spew out metric tons of hot molten rock with the ease of a child throwing a toy. Scientists had been predicting an eruption for quite awhile but the speed and severity of how Kilauea has erupted caught even them off guard.

How much more off guard would be we be caught if Yellowstone erupted? In the last few years there have been thousands of small earthquakes in the Yellowstone region indicating violent subterranean activity. If you didn't know it, Yellowstone National Park is actually the caldera of a super-volcano. If, or when, that super-volcano erupts, scientists think it could cover most of the United States in sulfur and ash and possibly kill one hundred million Americans. It might even launch the planet into an ice age.

All the while, in the weeks and months leading up to that eruption, our authorities would urge us to remain calm, to act in safe ways. Can you blame them? Who would want three hundred million people to panic all at once, especially over something they can neither affect nor prevent? Tell me: do you think that we can prevent the end of time when God wills it to be so? We'd have better luck trying to affect the volcano. What God wills to destroy WILL be destroyed, and this earth, our only home, is marked for eventual destruction.

But tell me this, too: do we need to be destroyed when that happens? You know the answer.

Jesus doesn't will for us to be destroyed. Indeed, He lived, died, and resurrected to prevent our destruction. His saving grace is the only saving we need. Even if our earth is destroyed, even if our bodies die, we can live with Jesus forever when He comes to make all things new. All it takes is "I believe." When the chips are down and the troubles begin, do you?

The end will come. People have been predicting it since Jesus left the first time, and every age interprets signs in nature to mean the end is coming in their lifetime, yet here we are. Yet here we are with the same dire need they had as well: to be ready now.

For further reading: Jeremiah 4:10, Ezekiel 13:10, Job 15:21, Psalm 35:8, Isaiah 29:5, 1 Thessalonians 5:4.

*Lord, prepare me every day to meet You, to see the signs and be ready.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 10 May 2018

*But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 1 Thessalonians 5:4 (NIV).*

Not in darkness...can we even fathom that thought?

My friend Patrick preaches a lot about light versus darkness. In many places in the New Testament, Jesus refers to Himself as the light, and how in him there is no darkness. There can't be. Darkness symbolizes void, emptiness, ignorance, the absence of light (and what is good). Jesus is none of those things. Where Jesus is, there is undeniable, life-giving light that makes the darkness flee. It fills the void, replaces the emptiness. In Jesus, there is everything.

Just yesterday I was reading a devotion where it mentioned how Jesus revealed everything about the Father to His disciples. Imagine that. Jesus revealed EVERYTHING about the Father. There was nothing about Him that Jesus knew that He didn't reveal to His friends, these imperfect, sinful people like you and me. The voids, nooks and crannies of their empty souls were filled by Jesus's revelation of the Father. Everything that there was to know about the Father was told, and there was nothing more that anyone could know. The Bible verse was in John, and it was short and subtle, understating the importance of such a mind blowing concept. God the Father, the creator of all things, making Himself fully, completely known through His Son.

What's the point? The light that filled the disciples made it so that there was nothing about the return of Jesus that would be surprising. They had known Him fully, and would soon know Him in death, then again in resurrected life. After that, NOTHING about Jesus could or would surprise them in any way. The Father had revealed everything they needed to know about it to prepare to meet Him for eternity.

That same thing is true for us today. I struggle with the practice of turning everything over to Jesus, of so fully opening up my heart to Him that He crowds everything else out. In futility, I cling to "I can do it" and push Jesus aside. Is it any wonder when I feel alone? And when I feel alone, there is darkness. Yet I also know that, if I let my guard down to Him fully, He'll fill me back up with His light. His light feels like love because that's what it is. It's peaceful, patient, understanding. When I feel the presence of my faith in Jesus, even though I have tried to keep Him at arm's length, I feel good. That's something I can fathom.

For further reading: Acts 26:18, 1 John 2:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:5.

*Lord, fill the empty places of my life with Your holy light.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 14 May 2018

*But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 1 Thessalonians 5:5 (NIV).*

One of the verses my Concordia reference cites for 1 Thessalonians 5:5 is Luke 16:8, which is the verse in the parable of the shrewd manager where Jesus talks about how the shrewd manager was commended by his creditor for acting wisely according to the ways of the world. The manager was astute and sharp about practical things – debts – that were owed to his boss. He did this to gain standing with people because he realized his position in the world was in danger.

Have you considered that Jesus gives us faith to be shrewd with it? We are to be generous, outgoing, joyous, giving, sharing, submissive, and loving in how we share our faith, yet we are also to be astute and wise. The devil is often called “the prince of this world” because he has set himself up as the ultimate authority, the ruler, of all things earthly. Even though it isn’t so and even though he has already been supplanted through eternity, it is also still a fact with which we must deal here. In being bold warriors for Christ, we are tasked with using our faith wisely, sharply, astutely as we defeat the many tactics of the evil one.

That means being wise around each other. If a friend is weak in faith, we should do things to build them up, encourage them, be a friend to them. If a friend is strong in faith, we should find ways to support their mission. If someone wrongs us, we should always examine ourselves to see if there is indeed wrongdoing in our response or ourselves, and then we should readily forgive and seek understanding. These are behaviors that are wise, measured, and prudent – you know: shrewd – for God’s people to exhibit when interacting with each other, especially if the other person doesn’t follow Jesus. Such shrewd, wise behavior may just be a way Jesus can use to touch their heart.

Why would we want that? Yes, it’s even Godly to ask this, and you know the answer: because God loves all people and wants all to be saved. Eternity matters most, both being part of eternity now and an eternity with Jesus and His followers forever. Have we considered that those who don’t follow Jesus are in darkness? When the end of time comes, it will come as a surprise to them. They’ll be caught thinking “but I need more time.” Living our lives wisely, shrewdly, lovingly is the best witness we can give each other so that they will begin to walk with Jesus now, and rejoice when He returns instead of cowering in dark fear.

For further reading: Luke 16:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:6.

*Lord, I live in Your light. Constantly teach me to be shrewd with my faith so that You may use my days to reach others.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 15 May 2018

*So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. 1 Thessalonians 5:6-7 (NIV).*

WHAT??? Is Paul (and Jesus) telling us to get drunk? I'll admit it: every now and then I'd like that, especially when I want to escape my problems. Getting drunk would seem to numb the worries for a while, but that isn't what Paul is telling us.

Is Paul telling us to spend our time sleeping? I'll admit it (again): I envy people who can sleep for long stretches of time, twelve hours or more every day. That's an ability I don't seem to have because I rarely sleep more than 4-6 hours at most. But that isn't what Paul is telling us either.

These verses allude to self-control. Huh?

Remember that verse 5 talked about being in darkness, i.e. being in sin, not being wise about faith (or with our faith). Those who don't believe in this Jesus are in darkness and unwise. Yes, many (maybe even most) are good people who live good lives and are upright, reputable, and friendly. But they're still unwise because the truth of Jesus is self-evident and they ignore it. Indeed, Jesus Christ is the foundation of truth, the bedrock of it. It's a tough thing to say "I believe in Him" because it almost certainly guarantees you a tough row to hoe. It's hard to walk a faith walk, especially in a world that seems to chew up and spit out so many good people so easily.

That's the fate of those who walk in darkness, willfully walking without Jesus. They are asleep to Him, unaware of what goes on around them while they slumber through the reality that is God. They aren't sober; they're drunk on the self-focused idolatry of saying "I know better." When you boil it down, that's the profession of anyone who says they don't believe in Jesus. It's a selfish, dark, empty thing.

When you're asleep to Jesus, it is all night all day. It is darkness because Jesus is the only light of the world. What Paul is reminding us in these verses is that those who deny Jesus, refuse to follow Him, or even are ignorant of Him are in spiritual darkness. Lest we think believers are any better, remember that hypocrites walk in darkness, too. The antidote? Start with self-control. Control our wisdom; control our words. Soberly place thoughts under our control, and consciously re-think on the light whenever darkness creeps in. Do these things because non-followers are watching even while asleep, because these things give glory to God.

For further reading: Romans 13:11, Matthew 25:13, Acts 24:25, Acts 2:15, Romans 13:13, 2 Peter 2:13, 1 Thessalonians 5:8.

*Lord, I pray, shine Your love-light for me today. Guide my eyes to it, and shine brighter when my sight shifts elsewhere.*



## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 16 May 2018

*So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. 1 Thessalonians 5:6-7 (NIV).*

Another thought on darkness and falling asleep.

Several people close to me are currently struggling with faith. They believe, or did believe at some points in their lives, but they're being attacked right now and are struggling. One is sick with a chronic disease, marital difficulties, and unbelieving family members surrounding her. Another is worried about her daughter, burned out by things in life, and wondering where God is in all this. Another is mad at his church, which over-used his talents and abused his generosity. They're ripe for attack by Satan, and he's doing a top job of constantly buffeting their emotions. They're tired.

Then there is me. I'm unemployed again. While my prospects for finding a job are good, it's still a fact that I'm out of work for the third time in two years. It makes me question so many things, and I feel inadequate, scared. I feel sure I haven't done things to label myself as a troublemaker, but to be honest, when your work ends, you find it difficult to feel fully sure about many things. I feel vulnerable and apprehensive of where to go next. Lump me in with those who are being attacked by the evil one. I'm sleepy.

Sometimes on a faith-walk, we fall asleep. The world tires us out and we let ourselves become distracted. Satan uses those distractions to twist understanding, trying to yank us away from Jesus. He knows he can't yank Jesus away from us, but he can pull us away from Him by working to shift our focus. We fall asleep to Jesus but remain too awake in the world. When that happens, sin ensues. I'm betting that anyone who realizes they're being attacked by Satan could tell you similar stories.

The good news in all this is the Good News. Jesus lived, died, and lives again to redeem sinners like me and my family and friends and you. When we let ourselves fall asleep to faith and fall into sin's grasp, He's there to remind us that He is the better way. That we're forgiven and that it's time to wake up to His light. His light is daytime, and it's warm, embracing, cleansing, loving. It's another chance. Everything that needed to be done to set me right with God – and be at peace in this world – He has already done.

Struggles will happen; we're sinful by nature, and sin will be in our lives as long as we have a pulse. Just remember that, at any time, it's time to wake up to the light.

For further reading: Romans 13:11, Matthew 25:13, Acts 24:25, Acts 2:15, Romans 13:13, 2 Peter 2:13, 1 Thessalonians 5:8.

*Lord, wake me up today. It's time to rise for You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 21 May 2018

*But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. 1 Thessalonians 5:8 (NIV).*

Let's talk about the full armor of God. This verse plainly mentions it, putting on "faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet." That verbiage easily lines up with Ephesians 6; go read it and see for yourself. Think about armor and why it's needed, who uses it, and what it's used for. Then come back to 1 Thessalonians to ask yourself a question:

Who is protected by armor?

Of course the wear is protected; the soldier, the hunter, the defender. The armor protects the wearer during combat, from elements, while being attacked. It shields the wearer from harm and gives them confidence to advance, to do their part in battle. It's no accident, then, that Paul speaks of the fruits of God's Spirit as armor. He speaks of faith, love, and hope as real, tangible defenses against the attacks of the evil one. Faith and love cover the heart, protecting the core of the body. Hope of salvation, which is a promise and not a wish, protects the head: home of the brain and four of the five senses. Faith and love literally keep us alive while the hope of salvation covers how we sense the world – and others – around us.

So ask that question again: who is protected by armor? Perhaps Paul is also alluding to the fact that the person NOT wearing the armor of God benefits from it. Think about it: faith, hope, and love are all from God and benefit the person not being covered by them as much as they do the person shielded by them. They are the qualities even un-believers desire and model. They are the foundation of charity and charitable behavior. They are the basis for kindness and understanding, even our entire civilization. Even when someone doesn't believe in God (and, thus, chooses to not wear the full armor of Him), they benefit from these practical, caring qualities of Him.

This is a tough world. The other day I mentioned how people close to me are being attacked. I wonder if they see people around them wearing the armor of God, and I wonder what they think about it. Jesus never promised the world would be rosy: He promised He would walk with us through it and never leave us. When we order our lives around Him, His Spirit begins to impart faith, love and hope into us that we can wear to both nourish us and protect us. That's the point, too, when it begins to show to others. And that's the greatest protection of all.

For further reading: Ephesians 6:10-17, 1 Corinthians 13:13, 1 Thessalonians 5:9.

*Lord, let me wear Your armor as a defense for the people I meet today.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 22 May 2018

*For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Thessalonians 5:9 (NIV).*

Last night I watched "Platoon." Best Picture of 1986. I first saw it at Fort Meade, Maryland that year in a theater full of Vietnam veterans, nearly all of whom were silent at the end and more than a few were crying. Besides being about combat, Platoon was about fall and redemption, about receiving salvation by surviving the hell of the Vietnam War.

After that, I watched the first few minutes of "Gladiator," Best Picture of 2000, also about war. Near the beginning, Maximus, Russell Crowe's character, said something profound: "what we do in this life carries over into eternity." Had he been real, Crowe's character would have lived just after the time of Christ. I wonder if he would have picked up this thought from those early Christians.

Salvation has indeed come to man and it didn't come by surviving war, though I'm sure most any war veteran can tell you that returning home safely was awful close. And salvation came to us specifically because what we do in this life can indeed carry over into eternity. Without Jesus' salvation, the idolatrous things we choose here will indeed be fully rewarded to us in eternity. By accepting salvation, something completely different is in store.

God didn't appoint Oliver Stone, Charlie Sheen, Russell Crowe, or any of us to suffer His wrath. He created us to love us, not to hurt us. Before we were even born, God loved us and breathed life into us so that we may breathe life back to Him; so that we might share His love with other people that they would know His love too. Being all love, Jesus knew that love-compelled isn't love at all, so He also gave us free will: the ability to choose one thing over another. Even if it means we choose things other than Him, Jesus loves us enough to respect our choices so that we might come to love Him just as freely. He didn't create us to feel the Father's holy wrath of hellish separation, but if that's what we choose, then He loves us enough to respect us and our choices.

At the end of Gladiator, Maximus dies, having freed Rome from the grip of a tyrant. At the end of Platoon, Charlie Sheen goes home to attempt to find something good of the world. We're not so different, you know. This verse comes at the end of a section talking about the end of time. It's a good reminder of why God made us. We're here to learn to love God, even as a world bathed in wrath works against us.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, 1 Thessalonians 5:10.

*Lord, love me today and encourage me so that I might avoid wrath and share love.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 23 May 2018

*He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 1 Thessalonians 5:10 (NIV).*

Jesus died for everyone, believer and unbeliever alike, whether we accept Him or not, so that we may spend eternity with Him. Dear unbelievers, read verse 10 again. Then have a nice day. No that isn't smug: it's a plea. It's an invitation. It's a statement of fact. It's a mission statement. It's a challenge. It's a matter of life and death, both His and ours.

In reality, it's almost unfair to talk about this verse apart from the ones immediately preceding and succeeding it; I encourage you to read both. Jesus died for us so that we don't have to live in wrath, or anticipate God's wrath. He did it knowing that this would be the best news humanity would ever receive: IF we chose to accept it.

Preachers are fond of (correctly) saying that Paul was the greatest missionary who ever lived. When you read his books again and again, you find that Paul easily, seamlessly mixes both practical and supernatural arguments for Christ. To him, the supernatural was matter of fact, an accepted thing. We of the 'enlightened' post-modern world seem to have a hard time believing that the supernatural is true (even though we don't seem to have much difficulty thinking comic book movies are reflections of how we wish we could be).

That's just now how things were with Paul, and with the people of his day. They had lived in the time of Jesus, seeing Him personally both before and after resurrection. They had witnessed miracles performed by Christ and by His followers. They lived in a world that accepted God (and gods) as facts, as part of the natural order; indeed, people of the first century more readily accepted divine creation than we did, and they lived in a time where science and logic ruled the public square even more so than now.

Yet, then as now, they still questioned, marveled, and wondered at how Paul could say the things he did and mean them. After all, people simply didn't die and come back the way Jesus did. People then as now were skeptical, even hostile, to ideas that offended their sensibilities.

And yet, when all the skepticism quieted down, Paul's words still stood, un-recanted and unchallengeable. This Jesus, murdered by Jerusalem and Rome together, died even for them so that even they might live in peace with Him forever. In a hostile world, Jesus' words offered a better way, a fresh start. They're truth to live and die by. It was, and is, truth to make us rise again.

For further reading: Romans 14:9, 2 Corinthians 5:15, 1 Thessalonians 5:11

*Lord Jesus, only You could live and die for us. Thank You for Your selfless death and resurrection.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 24 May 2018

*Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NIV).*

This is the greatest privilege of a believer. When you follow Jesus, your highest calling, best job, and greatest privilege is to encourage other people.

I'll brag on my wife. She's the best encourager I know. Quite honestly, sometimes it's downright annoying that she refuses to let things get her down, even really serious things like illness, crisis, or even death. When she let Jesus take hold of her soul, she meant it and she took it to heart. Any time something bad happens, she can always be counted on to look on the bright side and work to find ways to bring the good out of any situation. It's hard evidence of the Holy Spirit always at work inside of her.

I like to think the Apostle Paul would pat her on the back and say "keep on keepin on" (or something like that). In fact, I like to think he would say that to any of us who follow Jesus and use our status as His followers to encourage other people. That means 'being there' when someone has an issue. It means listening (something hard for me to do). It means helping out however someone needs help. It means actively praying for people, especially strangers and people who wrong us, and then doing what we can to help where we can. It means forgiving.

There was a stink last week when, in response to the Santa Fe, Texas school shooting, the mayor of Dallas said "spare us your thoughts and prayers and do your job." In the climate of frustration, fear, and anger that comes with this wave of evil, yes, Mayor Rawlings' comments are understandable even if they are insulting and repugnant. Yet the point he's making – we need to DO something – is a popular one. Might I suggest to the mayor that praying is the first step to 'doing something.' Indeed, any 'doing' is meaningless if it is done without the guidance and involvement of the Almighty. Yet now is also the time when believers get to step up to the plate and encourage each other, building each other up, and build up others. Being there, listening, comforting, not preaching, are perhaps the best witnesses for Jesus we could offer these days. They are practical faith, really 'doing something' meaningful.

Come to think about it, they're really the best things we could do any day, any time. Jesus died for everyone so that everyone might have the opportunity to come to know Him in faith and become part of heaven now. When encouraging each other, perhaps the best things we can offer are our actions. They prove our belief instead of simply talking about it. They are our highest calling. My wife would agree.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:12

*Lord, help me to encourage other people, other believers, and unbelievers every day of my life.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 30 May 2018

*Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. 1 Thessalonians 5:12 (NIV).*

Tough love is still love. Years ago, when I was in a bad place, some close friends mentored and supported me through the crisis. One leveled with me about his own past and how only repentance and faith had gotten him through his own hard times. Another listened to me and encouraged me but also held me to the spiritual fire, insisting that I needed to face things I had done, confess them, and own responsibility. Both men cared for me but righteously took me to task. Years later, we're still close friends.

Another time, while I was still in the Air Force, I watched as friends around me won awards that I wanted to win and even worked hard to win but still came up short. I went to our NCO in Charge and asked him what I needed to do to earn an award. His answer: "you aren't doing airman of the quarter work. Start acting like it and we'll see where it goes." All through my life I had been an achiever, easily earning high grades and accolades, so this was a dose of reality, a splash of some brutally cold – but necessary – water. I took his advice, began to become a team player, and eventually joined the ranks of those who had "earned wood" (meaning awards). Oh, and I'm still friends with the NCOIC.

Tough love.

Sometimes it's tough to tell someone things they don't want to hear. Sometimes it's even tougher to listen and NOT tell someone things you want them to hear. Yet when we're honest with ourselves, we have to acknowledge that there are others around us who do more, who are at different (maybe higher) levels of a faith-walk. It's a Godly thing to recognize it, and to give credit where it is due. And that's hard. Sometimes it's tough to say hard things to people we love without being judgmental but doing so in a loving, encouraging manner.

Yet that's what Paul reminds us to do. He tells us to acknowledge the good works of people around us while still holding them, ourselves, and even others accountable to what God's Spirit asks of us. To live with the fruit of the Spirit demands that accountability, and when we love people we want the best for them. Sometimes, that means giving both praise and rebuke, but doing both, always, the way Jesus would. God puts people in our lives to help us with this. We should be glad that He does.

THAT is tough love.

For further reading: Romans 16:6, 1 Corinthians 15:10, 1 Timothy 5:17, 1 Corinthians 8:7-12, 1 Thessalonians 5:13.

*My Lord, thank You for people in my life who keep me accountable to You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 31 May 2018.

*Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (NIV).*

What we do matters because we matter to God. Jesus doesn't tell us to look for situations where we are to back down, but He does tell us to turn the cheek and forgive generously when we are hurt. Jesus doesn't tell us to back down when we're attacked but He does tell us that He will be with us in all things and to offer ourselves fully when people challenge us. Jesus doesn't tell us to seek out trouble or hurt, but He does tell us that we will be persecuted for believing in Him and that this persecution may kill us in the body though we will then live forever with Him.

Jesus also said that salt is good but not if it loses its flavor. You and me: we're salty. Probably not just in our language, probably not just in our demeanor: we're salty with the flavor of life. The people who seem 'saltiest?' They're the ones who lead us, providing lessons and serving as our mentors. We learn from people like that, and their example becomes our own. We emulate them, taking on their behavior. The things they do: we start to do them.

That matters. What they do matters because they know that Jesus knows that people are watching. They know we're always works in progress. Yet other people are watching us all the same. They're observing, learning, judging, deciding; shouldn't our words and actions of faith line up? Shouldn't we be the people God called us to be no matter where we are & who we're with?

When we get weak in the faith – when the taste of our salt becomes bland – thank God for the mentors and examples of others that He gives us. Thank God for the parent or grandparent, close friend, devout believer, whoever who you look to as a faithful believer. They're people we can go to for advice and for spiritual support. Then, when the world backs us up against a wall we don't have to fail. We don't have to stay weak in the faith. Instead, thinking of their example, we can ask Jesus to draw near to us and encourage us, stand with us, and fight for us.

That matters most of all.

For further reading: Romans 16:6, 1 Corinthians 15:10, 1 Timothy 5:17, 1 Corinthians 8:7-12, Mark 9:50, 1 Thessalonians 5:13

*My Lord, draw near to me and strengthen me to stand for You. Fight for me and uphold me in Your righteous way.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 4 June 2018

*And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 (NIV).*

“Warn, encourage, help, be:” read the verse again and focus on the action verbs that it requests of the reader. Keep in mind that, in this chapter, Paul has discussed matters of the end times and Christ’s return, and he is wrapping up his letter to his friends in Thessalonica. Immediately prior to this he encouraged them to always be thankful for their spiritual mentors and leaders.

Now Paul is spurring, even commanding, his friends to action. Warn troublemakers, encourage those who are down, help everyone (because we’re all weak in some way), and be patient; warn, encourage, help, be. Perhaps that last one is the most important: be.

Be. Just be. Just be there, be patient, be patient with everyone. Be in someone’s life. Be wise about your time, talents, and treasures and how you use them to fulfill your mission that God gives you. Be in God’s Word. Be in communion with Him with every breath you take. Be.

In French, “etre” is the verb that says “to be.” God, through Paul, tells us to BE. He is; He is the great I AM. God is the ultimate etre, the ultimate being and state of being, and He commands us to model Him. We are to be in the world while not of the world. We are to be both present and accounted for, ready for duty at all times no matter what our duty in His service is. And in this verse, He implores us to be patient. In doing this, God tells us to be involved in relationship.

We are to be and be patient because HE is “there for us” and is always patient with us. Yes, we are to use our services to warn others who interfere with God’s purposes. Yes, we are to use our time to encourage people who are down, whose hearts are in danger of being pulled away from God. Yes, we are to help those who are not as strong as ourselves, physically, spiritually, emotionally, financially, in whatever way we can.

And, yes, we are to use our time, talents, and treasures here to be for others. We are to use the wonderful gifts of life that God gives to us to serve His higher mission (or, as Randy Frazee might put it, do our part in the Upper Story). That starts with being patient with other sinners. You know: people like us.

“People like us” means “everyone.” We are to be in each other’s lives, and we are to be patient with each other. What we do here does indeed matter because we matter to God. That starts with simply being then being patient.

For further reading: 2 Thessalonians 3:7, Romans 14:1, 1 Corinthians 8:7-12, 1 Thessalonians 5:15

*Lord Jesus, teach me today to be for You.*



## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 5 June 2018

*Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. 1 Thessalonians 5:15 (NIV).*

I've long struggled with the boundaries we place over how much "the church" should govern our lives. In this verse, Paul seems to be saying "fully!" Indeed, Paul stresses in nearly all of his letters that we should do good for each other, and treat each other with maximum forgiveness and maximum kindness. In that respect, what we worship and celebrate on Sundays "in church" should govern every minute of our lives all week long, not just once a week. More important, we should be loving to everyone, not just the people like us.

And I struggle with that. Do you? I'd be surprised if you didn't.

It's tough to really, really absorb words of the New Testament that tell us to give up ALL control over our lives and trust Jesus to remake us. We rail against that, even more so since we're "independent Americans." We value our self-reliance and our independent streak. Jesus tells us, though, to give up that independence and depend fully on Him. He asks us to be His brother and sister, His friend, His fellow man, and He proves Himself to be God Immanuel, our only need. He proves hAnd in spite of all that, we STILL rail against it. We still struggle with giving ourselves over to Him to really, truly love our fellow man.

Paul asks us to "strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else." He isn't talking about just our family and friends. In Paul's day, he was talking about doing good for the Romans, and the Greeks who mocked him, and the Jews who tried to kill him over and over. He tells us to model our hearts, and then our hands, on Jesus, who gave Himself up to His created beings so that they wouldn't have to endure spiritual agony.

He did it for you and me, too.

And we struggle with it. Surely there's something more we must do to be worthy of it. Yes, I really do know better! And "that guy" or "that woman" who hurt me, well, they don't deserve forgiveness. I'll give over 99.9% of everything to God but that .01%, well, that's not part of the bargain.

You know it is.

You can live a "good life" without being believing in Jesus. There are millions of people who do just that, and they seem like decent people (even though they're immortally lost). Yet without Jesus, they live for nothing of real value. With Jesus, they live for the only thing of value in life. How much do you struggle with that idea?

For further reading: Romans 12:17, 1 Peter 3:9, Ephesians 4:32, 1 Thessalonians 5:16

*Lord Jesus, forgive me for how I struggle against You. Teach me Your better way.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 6 June 2018

*Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. 1 Thessalonians 5:15 (NIV).*

Before we move on from verse 15, let's talk about one more aspect of it: making sure. The Geneva Bible translates those words "we desire you." The King James says "see that" as does the Living Bible. And the New English Bible says "see to it." You get the picture. In living our lives, we are to be engaged in others' lives. What's more, in being engaged with others, we are to desire to see to it that NOBODY pays back wrong for wrong. We are to live to serve others and keep them from doing harm.

In our age of social media, that's getting tough. We are each "all right all the time." Too many times I get caught up in the argument and try to be right instead of trying to help; how about you? Jesus doesn't tell us to back down when we're wronged, but He does tell us to do all things being mindful of His example and the needs of others. That includes online. It's hard to call out our friends when they step over the line. It's tough to back away from an argument without stooping to insults. It's difficult to know when to stop and let someone else have the last word.

Actually, though, it isn't hard, tough, or difficult to do any of those things. It's Godly. It's what Jesus did. It's what Paul is imploring his friends to do.

And he's imploring them to ALWAYS do it, to make sure we use our time, talents, and treasures to ensure we always treat others in a Christ-like manner. We can't be treating others in a Christ-like manner if we aren't willing to politely, faithfully engage them where they are. And we can't be treating others in a Christ-like manner when we get wrapped around the axle of arguments, (largely unimportant) small points, and petty things.

Perhaps the root of it is pride. Just yesterday, I read a Joyce Meyer devotion that talks about how a proud heart isn't marked with having to get the last word, or always trying to be right, or always being argumentative or stressing others. I've been proud; too proud. Again, how about you?

The cure for that is to humbly walk back from my pride and focus on what Paul is echoing from the Lord. Be engaged in other people. Love, be patient, listen, seek understanding, be empathetic. Above all, use your life to try to do good for others, to help them avoid doing wrong or being harmed. No, it really isn't hard at all to do any of those things. We should desire for each other to see to that.

For further reading: Romans 12:17, 1 Peter 3:9, Ephesians 4:32, 1 Thessalonians 5:16

*Lord, forgive me and teach me Your better way for living with people.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 12 June 2018

*Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV).*

I'm always amazed at how much power God packs into short verses. Good writers will tell you to not waste words. Go easy on the adjectives, use adverbs sparsely, watch the prepositional phrases. Above all: brevity (which, said William Shakespeare, is the soul of wit). God is the wittiest writer of all.

Rejoice always; noodle those two words for their power. Not "don't worry be happy" but "rejoice." Not "when you feel happy" but "always." Freaking always; as in "all the time" or "every minute of our lives" or "without ceasing" or even "wholeheartedly." That's not wimpy.

Pray continually. Be in 100% communion – in spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual union – with God at all times and in all ways. Prayer is an active conduit; a transmission line of the most real, visceral matters of the heart. Paul isn't lobbing more human weight on us. He's imploring us to hook our lives up to God's lifeline and channel Him into every second of our lives. The way to do that is prayer, praying in all that we do. Make it second nature.

Give Thanks. Give thanks when we awaken. Give thanks when we fall asleep. Give thanks for victories and defeats and challenges and setbacks and love and hurt and family and even enemies. Give thanks in all circumstance for all circumstances serve God's better purposes.

For this is: for this is God's will. "This is." Think of those as a way of saying the I AM, the ultimate etre, to be, is being in your life. What is is because He wills it to be so. If something is, it is because of God, not because of any other reason for God is the only reason, God is the only being and ultimate truth. We get to rejoice, pray with Him, and be thankful for Him. Because of that, life has meaning and purpose.

Paul uses this benediction to remind his friends of the actions a follower of Jesus would want to take. It isn't easy: doing these things – rejoicing, praying, giving thanks, accepting the fact of God – requires deep personal commitment. Faith in Jesus isn't for the faint of heart. Indeed, not believing is the coward's track in life. Atheism and agnosticism are the easy paths even as they result in dead ends. Yet Paul's friends – and us – got to take these simple steps in a faith walk that continues to this day.

And God says it all in just a few simple words.

For further reading: Philippians 4:7, Luke 18:1, Ephesians 5:20, 1 Thessalonians 5:19

*Lord, thank You for the power you pack into your words. Make them the constitution of my life.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 20 June 2018

*Do not quench the Spirit. 1 Thessalonians 5:19 (NIV).*

Not long ago, I stayed with some folks who are going through a really tough time. Sickness, anger, division, hatred, divorce, financial difficulties, job problems, Satan: I maintain their family is being attacked by the devil. One person seems to be firmly in the grip of evil. Another is having a breakdown and is battling many personal issues. And then there is the third person. He is nearly a man, full grown and finishing school. He's impressionable and has struggled hard to get to where he is, fighting health, educational, and personal challenges that would have broken lesser boys.

His spirit is threatened. There are influences around him who are working diligently to quench God's Spirit from working on him. As a result, he's struggling even more. At one point, the young man was exploring Christianity, finding comfort and purpose in it. That's all done, at least for now. Someone close to him – someone he admires – crushed this nascent belief. The young man has now embraced atheism and dark matters (because that same close person also embraces them). Indeed, I've rarely felt the presence of evil – and then the more powerful presence of God – than I have in the home where this young man lives.

Paul reminds us that we are not to quench God's Spirit. Make no mistake: God's Spirit is so much more powerful than even the strongest evil, yet it's fully within our power to quench it in our lives. If God wills to overcome our unbelief through whatever means He will, then He will. Yet it's unmistakable from Paul's time into ours that God doesn't want people who are forced to believe in Him. He wants people to believe in Him willingly, by choice. Love doesn't compel: love chooses. God could crush evil with a single thought, yet He doesn't because love doesn't force. Love gives, including giving free choice and even hard choices.

What happens when we don't choose love? God is all love, and when we choose something other than love, we run the risk of choosing something other than God. When we do that, we are pouring cold, cold water on the fire of God's Spirit burning in our lives. Whatever good is being produced is put at risk. Whatever good we might be doing for others by sharing God's love is also put at risk. God doesn't NEED our good works, but He asks for them in His Name so that His love might increase. When we choose something other than God, we injure His love; we deny it. Paul reminds us to not put out the fire of God's Spirit. For the sake of my young man friend, I hope those around him stop doing that. It does him no good.

For further reading: Ephesians 4:30, 1 Thessalonians 5:20

*Lord, inspire in me today a Spirit to love You among others. Let me share You so that Your great love might increase.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 21 June 2018

*Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good. 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21 (NIV).*

What is prophecy? Wikipedia (currently) defines it as “a message that is claimed by a prophet to have been communicated to them by a god. Such messages typically involve inspiration, interpretation, or revelation of divine will concerning the prophet’s social world and events to come.” In the Old Testament, there were many prophets; think Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Amos, and a slew of others. What about our “modern” world?

What about pop culture? The media is ALWAYS looking for prophets; anyone who can predict future outcomes. Indeed, after every election, the media (and we, ourselves) look at which pollsters or prognosticators came closest to predicting the winning side. As a society, we place great trust in polls, maybe too much. Yet look with scorn on things that predict matters of faith.

And how about churches? Do people today prophesy the way people did in Bible times? To be honest, I’ve never met a prophet. I have met a great many wise people, and I’ve met many people who use experience and God’s wisdom to make the best decisions they can. That usually means their actions foreshadow what happens later, though I don’t chalk this up to prophecy (but, instead, informed experience). Yet I can’t discount the fact that there are indeed people through whom God speaks to lead us along the paths He wants us to take.

What does Paul say about all these things? Consider all of them, test all of them, and trust the ones that are good. As part of this benediction, Paul says we are not to put out the fire God sets in people around us. Don’t quench the work of the Spirit. In doing that, it logically follows that we shouldn’t be skeptical or sarcastic about those who may be prophesying around us. They have God’s fire. We should test them, question what they say and do, measure it against what the Bible says are the fruits of God’s Spirit.

Think of it this way: God is telling us to be judicious, to be wise in the ways He is wise. He’s telling us to listen to each other and to listen for content. God just might be speaking through that content. Yet He’s also telling us to listen with discernment, judging for meaning and comparing what is said against the Word He has given to us.

Most of all, He’s telling us to hold on to what’s good? How will we know what’s good? It’s simple: it will line up with the Bible. It won’t contradict Scripture, and it won’t lead us deeper into sin. It will be Godly, and it will be for good. Don’t trust your feelings to judge these things: consult your Bible.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 14:1, 1 John 4:1, Romans 12:9, 1 Thessalonians 5:22

*Lord, help me to test prophecies against the truth of Your Word.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 22 June 2018

*... reject every kind of evil. 1 Thessalonians 5:22 (NIV).*

Reject evil; every kind, not just the kind we can see. We are to reject every kind of evil from the Exorcist-in-your-face-head-spinning evil to the subtle evil that lives in our ungodly good intentions.

A few years ago, a preacher friend of mine mentioned that he thought the suburbs were the most evil places in America. His point makes perfect sense because the suburbs are the homes of easy temptation, taken-for-granted affluence, and the lackluster practice of faith. Affairs, apathy, lying, deception, greed, uncaring attitudes, animosity: hardly fruits of the Spirit but all rampant in the bedroom communities of our cities. My friend's point seems undeniable.

Maybe you haven't considered it before but the areas of your life where you're most comfortable may also be your most vulnerable points. They're the places where Satan is most likely to present petty evil to you in ways that you'll accept. "Just one more drink." "We really shouldn't be doing this." "Nobody will ever know." "It's not as bad as that other guy." If you've said these things, you might just be under attack. They're sly evil creeping into your life.

Evil doesn't just have to present itself as Damien the Omen child. It's in the things around us that we read, what we do, and eventually in what we think. A few days ago I mentioned staying with friends who, I believe, are under attack by the devil. During the stay, we had a blow-up, a fight over believing in God. I've never felt such rage from another person, but when I looked around and saw the dark influences in which he lived – books, posters, habits, etc – it's understandable why he'd channel these evils. This young man is bathed in anti-God thought by folks closest to him and doesn't even realize how badly he's under siege. At the end of the argument, I left the house and broke down sobbing. It's desperately sad to see people being devastated.

What's the point? We are to reject all evil, not just the things we consider to be really bad. Affairs, cheating on expense reports, anger at your neighbor: reject them. Books by Aleister Crowley and the Necronomicon: reject them. Pride that tells you how you know better than anyone else: reject. What we take into our heads we take into our hearts. ANYTHING apart from God: it's evil; reject it. In this verse, Paul reminds us to test each idea and to reject those that even hint at evil. It's not just a Godly behavior: it's a tool for surviving. Evil seeks to destroy us, and whether we acknowledge it or not, evil is real. We are to reject it and stand against it.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:23

*My Lord I reject evil and embrace You. You prevail in all ways always over evil.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 25 June 2018.

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Thessalonians 5:23 (NIV).*

This is a tall order. Admit it: you can't do this on your own; I know I can't. I'm betting quite a few people are better than I am at behaving themselves and at resisting temptation. There are quite a few people who wouldn't give a second thought to the pet sins that have plagued my life. But the dirty secret is that there are many of THEIR pet sins that wouldn't interest me in the slightest yet these may be very real struggles for them. Everyone has a vice, even the folks we consider to be upright or pious. Gambling, porn, drinking, marijuana, profanity, power, gossip, pride; pick one or name another. Got skin, got sin.

Which is why Paul ends his letter with this benediction. He doesn't end with "prayers and positive thoughts to you" or "thinking of you" or "best wishes, pal." He invokes the tangible, real presence of the all powerful creator in the daily lives of his friends. He asks for, even implores, God's real action in their lives. And he prays for this over his friends, asking that God set them apart as pure, then preserve everything about them to keep them blameless.

Paul knows his friends will be tempted; he has just written about how evil will always work to tempt us and how we must reject it. Paul understands that his fellow believers are sinners like himself. Paul realizes that they can't be blameless in God's presence without God Himself making it possible. So he prays this benediction over them, both requesting for them and reminding them that God gives peace and sanctification. Only God can do this; only Jesus is the only way.

Hint: that's still true. Paul's words still resonate with us because they still apply. The same God who spoke everything into existence through His Son is still abiding with us now. The same God who watched that Son die on that cross – and felt it all through Him – is still living through us today. The same God who forgave, sanctified, and strengthened Paul and the Thessalonians 2000 years ago is still doing those things for us today. We don't have to do anything to please God; in fact we can't. But we do need to see Him through our hearts, to submit to Him and believe Him. Tall order or not, without God's presence in our lives, we don't stand much of a chance against evil.

For further reading: Romans 15:33, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:24.

*Lord Jesus, stay with me. Sanctify me, forgive me, abide with me. Without You, I am powerless.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 26 June 2018

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 (NIV).*

Paul isn't talking about himself here: he's clearly talking about God. Some folks have used verse 24 to say "see, it's Paul saying it, not God. He isn't speaking for God." Let's just go there: that's dumb. Of course Paul is talking about God and of course he's talking for God (specifically, it's God talking through Paul). The proof? "The one who calls you is faithful."

Face it: other than God, anyone who "calls" you isn't faithful. We're human; we're people; we're fallible. We make mistakes, even when we're motivated by love and good intentions. At some point, any person who calls you to do something, change, be, or whatever will fail you. Why? Because they're human, people, fallible: just like you. And me. At some time, we fail each other.

God never fails us. Even when we don't see or understand His actions – and especially when we don't like them – He is always faithful in keeping His word to us. He doesn't change; God doesn't evolve. His love is always where He says it is and is always powerful, faithful, and true. If we feel disconnected from it, chances are we have listened to the call of something or someone other than just the Lord. Whether we feel Him or not, however, He's still reaching out to us and always does.

He will always do it because He is always love and justice for us. He is always faithful. When we feel those times of disconnect, we can ALWAYS go back to God and repent. "I was wrong. I did X and I'm sorry. Forgive me. Help me to change, to turn away and follow You better." Say something like that from the heart and you're on the road back. When you 'get there' you find God never left. In fact, He was there in and beside you even when you thought He wasn't. He is ready to help you transform. He is there to give you His peace, to sanctify you, to keep you blameless, to DO in your life. How He does that differs for each of us, but He does it all the same. Why did He let us suffer? Maybe the better question is "why did WE let us suffer?" God always rescues because God is always faithful.

Satan can't do that. You can't do that. The invented 'gods' of Asatru can't do that. Your friends, your sainted Aunt Sadie, and your most devout churchgoer can't do that because they aren't God. Only God can be truly faithful to us.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:25-28.

*Lord, forgive me for when I've been unfaithful to Your heart. Help me to always know You are with me.*



## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 27 June 2018

*Brothers and sisters, pray for us. Greet all God's people with a holy kiss. I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters. 1 Thessalonians 5: 25-27 (NIV).*

We live in really perilous times. Our political discourse has descended into shouts, invective, and violence. From the looks of things, that is going to get worse in the near future. Our economy is booming but there are real, ominous signs of a serious economic correction dead ahead. Even in good times, there are still many in need. Worst of all, we seem to be losing our way. We are turning away from God's guidance in so many ways and our society, our lives, are suffering because of it. Abortion, gun violence, media / political corruption, apathy, anger and hatred: they're all negative barometers that are flashing red in 2018 America (maybe even 2018 planet Earth overall).

Pray for us. Brothers and sisters, if you aren't already, pray for us. All of us. Let's be real: the world WAS much more dangerous in 1914, 1939, 1962 than it was now. There have been many times in history when things were more perilous than they are now, yet now is all we have to contend with. We need prayer. We need each other to invite God into our processes, into our lives, to help us seek His better ways.

Let's greet each other with the holy kiss of our day. If you come up to me and want to pucker up, I won't; in this culture, that's weird. Overseas it's pretty normal, and it would have (obviously) been normal in Paul's culture...but it isn't here in North Texas (at least not in my circles). But the kiss isn't the point: the point is fellowship of the Spirit. We should greet each other in ways that show unity in the Spirit and love from the heart. Kiss, handshake, hug, smile, fist bump, bro slap, whatever: we are to do that.

Further, let's spread the Word. Paul's letter was indeed read to all the churches; all his letters were. He was the greatest missionary in history and his letters comprise most of the New Testament's non-Gospel books. We should read them again and again, putting Paul's advice into practice. We should prayerfully live our lives using these letters and the Gospels they echo as our guide. God, who is always faithful, will teach us, lead us, and work through us the more we grow in His Word. Let's use our lives, then, to spread that Word.

That way, whether the times are perilous or plentiful, we will be living in such a way as to amplify God's grace to everyone.

For further reading: Ephesians 6:19, Colossians 4:3, 2 Thessalonians 3:1, Romans 16:16, 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 1 Timothy 4:13, 1 Thessalonians 5:28.

*My Lord, let me share You affectionately, with enthusiasm, and with my full heart.*

## Practical Proverbial, from 1 Thessalonians, 28 June 2018

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. 1 Thessalonians 5:28 (NIV).*

What a great way to end a letter! Read it again: it's the perfect way to end a letter to several dozen of your close friends. Or several billion. Or to begin your day. Or to bless your dinner. Or to greet someone at WalMart (go ahead: try it!). Or...or...you get the picture.

Next time you say goodbye, invoke the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ into their lives until you meet again.

In fact, shouldn't this benediction be on your lips at all times? When we really love someone, when we adore them, when we care enough to send the very best (including a Hallmark), shouldn't we be blessing them with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to be with them? At or near the end of Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon, Paul uses nearly identical words to bless his readers with the grace of Jesus. He uses slightly different words in Colossians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus. The message: Jesus is the perfect way to end a letter.

Or begin your day...or bless your dinner...or, again, you get the picture.

We can't do any better than the grace of Jesus Christ. It's the grace of Christ that created us, then breathed life into us. It is the grace of Christ that sustains us in breath, blood and bone every day. It is by the grace of Jesus that we live and GET TO LIVE every day. It is by the grace of Jesus that we get eternal life after this one, and that we get to be part of that eternity now. It is through the grace of Jesus Christ that we can love.

If you could send a Hallmark to your very best friend, wouldn't you want to end it by giving them the best you had to give? That's what Paul is saying here (and in all those other letters). This was serious stuff to Paul who, just the verse prior to this one, had implored his friends to read the letter to others. Back then, it wasn't broken up into numbered verses; back then, Paul probably thought people wouldn't memorize his words. But he knew that God had spoken through them and that they were important. They were words that God wanted us to remember.

So it only follows that Paul would end the letter with a benediction that blesses the reader with the present grace of the God-man, Jesus, who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit, one God forever. With that thought, Paul closes out his letter and so shall we.

See you next time.

For further reading: Romans 16:20, 2 Thessalonians 1:1.

*Lord Jesus, bless me with Your wonderful grace today that I might share it with others.*