

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 2 July 2018

Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thessalonians 1:1-2 (NIV).

Is your 'church' "in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ?"

Over the weekend I went to a new church while visiting my kids near College Station. My wife and I were there to watch our grandson sing at a VBS performance. It was nice enough, but you know what's coming: nobody said "hello" or introduced themselves. That is, unfortunately, true in most cases at most places.

My reaction: no big deal. It isn't the first time I, as a stranger, have been ignored at a new place. It wouldn't even have been the first time if I had been in my own home church, where some folks can be cold as ice while others are the nicest, most outgoing people you'll meet all week. I'm betting that most of the 'strangers' at the College Station church were only strange to me. I'm guessing that more than a few of them hold the door at WalMart, or would help a neighbor pick up trash that blew on the yard. I'm guessing they would pitch in for friends and even other strangers if they knew such people were in need.

Surprise: this blog isn't to nag you about being friendly inside the confines of your church building. Being 'the church' outside the building is so much more important. Perhaps being friendly is our best way to witness that God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ have taken up residence in our hearts. Hold the door; smile back; help out; be a friend. To quote Kenny Chesney, "get along." In doing so, we share Him who inspires us.

We share His grace and peace. We enjoyed the VBS performance a lot. Yes, it was cheesy and, yes, it was typically what churches do every year. The VBS kids perform; the mission kids come back and talk about their trip; the Christmas in June fundraisers talk about big goals. They're all ways of sharing His grace and peace.

What's more, they're ways of sharing grace and peace that show how we're in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Such American summer rituals as VBS help churches (supposedly) reach out to kids and prospective new members. More importantly, though, they share a little Jesus by being kind, fun, and outgoing.

Here's your challenge: do those things without stepping over the threshold of a building. Formal churches can be unfriendly to strangers. Instead of that, share a little of Paul, God and Jesus by sharing His grace and peace by just being you. Today, in your own way. In God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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

Lord, teach me to share Your grace and peace with strangers today.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 3 July 2018

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. 2 Thessalonians 1:3 (NIV).

When was the last time you had a celebrity thank you, or give thanks for you being the way you are?

Over the weekend, my daughter worked at a celebrity event. She lives in California and worked an event where there were a great many celebrities present. She said it was surreal, and she got to meet most of the celebrities attending; she's a bartender so I'd expect that. Anyway, according to her, the famous people she met were mostly nice but quite common. I can't recall her ever saying that any of them said "I thank God for you because I can see your faith is growing and you love so many people."

Time to name drop. I've personally met Billy Graham, Louie Anderson, Barack Obama, Jeff Goldblum, James Taylor, Ross Perot, Keith Ellison, Chuck Horner, Alex Trebek, and all of Blink 182. Up close and personal I've seen Bob Hope, Chuck Yeager, Betty White, and I've seen every president (except President Trump) going all the way back to Jerry Ford plus more than a few famous performers on stage. Celebrities are just people who are famous. Their blood is red; their hair gets messy; they have body odor. As it was with my daughter, I can't recall any of them saying "I thank God for you."

But Paul did. He had gotten to know the members of the church in Thessalonica, and he had become famous throughout the known world of the Mediterranean. When Paul wrote his epistle to his friends in Thessalonica, he said that he (and Silas and Timothy) always thanked God for them.

Imagine a celebrity saying that about you. We all get star-struck, and more than a few people in Thessalonica may have been star-struck about Paul. Yet he said it about them, about their lives, about their faith in God. Two thousand years later, we're still reading about it. Except for Mr. Obama, two thousand years from now it is very unlikely people will read about, or know about, any of the celebrities I mentioned above. In as little as one hundred years, most people won't even know about you or I.

Yet Jesus will because He always does. Paul the celebrity thanked God because Jesus the Son of God lived and died for him, and for the Thessalonians, and for you and me. Jesus, the creator of the universe, knew you and me before we were even born. He knows us now. He knows us intimately. One hundred years ago and a hundred years from now, Jesus knew and loved each of us. When Jesus name-drops, He drops YOUR name, and Jesus is the ultimate celebrity.

For further reading: 2 Thessalonians 1:4.

Lord Jesus, thank You.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 4 July 2018, Independence Day

Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. 2 Thessalonians 1:4 (NIV).

Because today is Independence Day, a few words about the United States.

We persevere through faith. Scratch the surface of the veneer that is our popular culture and you see that we, as the United States of America, persevere. We persevere because our nation was founded on the idea of human liberty that is a gift from God. That having faith in God is what makes us successful and able to persevere. Those who would tear down that notion and replace it with twisted ideologies like socialism miss the point. Our rights, our liberties, our blessing as a nation can't be taken away by men. It was given to us by God. Knowing that, we persevere.

This isn't to say that we are better than anyone else because we as a people aren't. It's true that our institutions, our history, and our dedication to freedom do indeed set us apart from every other nation in human history. Nobody else has done the things our nation has, and that makes America special. We are indeed a place set apart where you can be what you want to be. But let's not get too big for our britches and say we're better than other people because we just aren't.

What makes us special, however, comes from the Almighty. On July 2, 1776, the Second Continental Congress voted to declare America's independence from Great Britain. On July 4th, those same traitors signed the instrument of treason that made it official. The primary author of the Declaration of Independence acknowledged that man's rights were given to mankind by "Nature's God" (Thomas Jefferson's words, not mine). Thus, the first nation in history conceived on the idea of liberty was conceived acknowledging that liberty originates with God. 242 years later, informed Americans still believe this is so.

The idea of God-given liberty isn't in vogue today. Indeed, the protection of liberty must always be upheld by each new generation if it's to endure. We have persevered to overcome the challenges of settling a continent, throwing off the evil of slavery, throwing off the slavery of economic calamity and governmental dependence, and the ongoing challenges posed by evil enemies who hate us because we're free. Because we believe in God. There are nations in the world with deeper faith than the US, that express faith better than we do. Yet there is no place on earth that has been so uniquely blessed by God as the United States of America. We have always persevered because of God. As long as acknowledge that we are free only through our God, we can continue to do so no matter what persecutions and trials are ahead.

For further reading: 2 Thessalonians 1:5.

Lord, thank You for blessing my home, America. Help us to always see You as the only source of our liberty.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 5 July 2018

All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. 2 Thessalonians 1:5 (NIV).

Does God cause us to suffer? Does God persecute us, or allow us to be persecuted? Does God persecute, punish, or cause suffering for some people and not others, and does this sometimes cause us to suffer even when we have done nothing wrong? Repeat after me: yes. It's simply the truth, though we might debate how much we, vs God, actually cause the suffering. Last question: does that make God's judgment wrong or evil?

No. Of course not.

Yet repeat this too, friend sinner. We don't deserve to be saved and our choices merit God punishing us. Even when we haven't done anything to merit the 'punishment' that seems to be happening to us, we don't deserve the beautiful grace God gives to us. That's what makes it grace. It's undeserved, un-asked-for, something we can't get on our own but is freely given to us because He who gives it loves more than we do.

As a result, it is impossible to see that grace, to accept it, and NOT conclude that God's judgment is right. Noodle that thought awhile. You and I can't accept that grace is a good thing (and thus whoever gives grace is doing good for us) yet conclude that He who gives it has bad judgment. Yet be wary of the logical fallacy where B does not necessarily always follow A.

Consider, then, how, with God, He only brings or allows suffering so that grace might increase. He doesn't cause grace by invoking suffering but, instead, brings good out of that suffering. He always punishes only where punishment is earned. When Jesus allows suffering, he always offers clear paths back to His healing love. What's more, God loves us enough to allow us to embrace the consequences of our choices. Sometimes we choose things are destructive; got skin, got sin. It is love that respects those choices, love that counsels "you shouldn't do that. He offers an excellent, better way" yet stands back when we say "no." An all-powerful God could simply compel us to do His bidding. After all, that's what we would do. And that isn't love.

Where love is, grace is. Where grace is, God is. Where God is, there is justice. Justice follows right judgment.

Let's conclude by keeping it real. That also means God's actions don't always seem fair; it's true. Yet where in the Bible did God promise fairness? He promised love, forgiveness, peace, and justice, and He gives them. When you have those things, fair is meaningless. Indeed, those qualities replace fairness, and those qualities always define God. That is fairer than we deserve, and that brings us back to grace.

For further reading: Romans 6:1, Philippians 1:28, 2 Thessalonians 1:6.

Lord, help me to submit to You and Your right judgment.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 9 July 2018

God is just: he will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7 (NIV).

God is good. He helped me achieve a life goal, and it's gonna be roasted to a crisp.

I'm working in New England this week and had a few free hours after my flight landed. So yesterday I traveled to Vermont. That meant I have now been in all 50 states of these United States. Again, that may not seem like much, but this is a big country. What's more, except for Nevada and North Dakota, I've been to 48 of those 50 since I left home at age 18, over half of them repeatedly. Vermont was the last state I needed to visit to join an elite club of people who spend way too much time on the road.

Vermont is a beautiful place. Hilly, green, lush, friendly. I only visited a few miles of it. I checked in on Facebook, posted some pictures, had a great chat with a Navy veteran at a tourist center, and then bugged out. But the drive up and back was gorgeous. Literally it was one of the most pleasant rides I've ever had.

One day it'll all be burned up in blazing fire from heaven.

That kind veteran I met: really nice guy. Vietnam Veteran; a veteran of the Gulf of Tonkin crisis in fact. He's been around, and I told him my story and that he was the first person I'd met in Vermont. We got along well, as vets do. Yet I hope he believes in Jesus because, if he doesn't, one day he'll know more trouble than he's ever thought possible.

Paul reminds us that God is just. He is perfect and His justice is perfect. It is exactly what every situation needs. God made this earth (and we who inhabit it) to be in perfect communion with Him so that we can share the blessings of Him. Yet we frustrated His just and good creation with our free choice of sin. Our just God respects our choices because that's what love does yet He has promised to return and make all things new. That will involve worldwide justice. And terror for those who thwart Him. And smiles and love and reunions. And it will involve fire.

Even in beautiful Vermont. It'll be a shame to think of such a wonderful place being scorched to a crisp. Yet God already has something even more beautiful in store. Knowing that, bring on the fire.

For further reading: Luke 18:7-8, Romans 12:19, Colossians 3:25, Revelation 6:10, Hebrews 10:27, 2 Peter 3:7, Jude 14, 2 Thessalonians 1:8.

Lord, thank You for helping with my goal. And thank You for Your coming justice!

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 10 July 2018

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 2 Thessalonians 1:8 (NIV).

Sad verse; this is a very sad verse.

I read all the “Left Behind” books. They’re fiction, yet in the scene where Jesus delivers His divine judgment against those who rejected Him, He is described as looking sad. For those who choose to not believe in Him, it will be a moment of supreme terror and it will show; for believers, it will be shock, and that’ll show as well. Yet for Jesus, I’m betting the book will have called it right. I’m betting Jesus will be sad in that moment, maybe even weeping.

Jesus didn’t come to destroy us. He won’t return with the sole purpose of doing that either. Even though He will return in mighty justice, heavenly fire, and more power than the world has ever known, that’s not why He’s coming back. He’s coming back to restore creation to the way He created it. He’s coming back to permanently restore true love, real harmony, and peace forever. Jesus is coming back in power and glory to claim His followers to bring them into eternity with Him and it will be the greatest day in history, especially since it will be the last one.

Yet involved in that will be expunging those who chose no part of it. Those who insisted they know better, those who spurned Him, those who embraced hypocrisy, those who live in hate and worldly pleasure, those who simply don’t care: they will be punished. He will unleash His angels to bind and eternally sentence them to be apart from Him. Oh, they’ll live forever; we are eternal beings whether eternally in heaven or hell. Yet their forever will be one of eternal punishment, apart from all love, hope, and peace in whatever hell has in store for them. Whether hell is literal fire or emotional torment (or both) we don’t know. Whatever is in it, it will be terrible.

I feel sorry for these unbelievers, especially since the Gospel isn’t a game of “I’ve got a secret.” It’s sad, and I’m thinking that’s how Jesus will feel. It’s not what He wants; it isn’t what He intended for His children. He wants brothers and sisters, friends, followers, lovers of His real love. He wants all of us to be saved, including scoffers. He wants saints and sinners side by side with Him forever. But He’s holy and the new Earth refined out of His fire will be holy like Him. For that holiness to exist, it must be free from all that reject Him. That means God will punish those who reject Him and who choose to reject the Gospel of Jesus. And that’s the saddest news ever even as it’s necessary.

For further reading: Philippians 3:9, 1 Thessalonians 5:3, 2 Peter 3:7, 2 Kings 17:18, Isaiah 2:10, 2 Thessalonians 1:9.

Lord Jesus, come quickly and have mercy.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 11 July 2018

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you. 2 Thessalonians 1:8-10 (NIV).

When I was a kid, I spent most of my middle school years in southeast Oklahoma. During lunch hours, I sat with kids who talked about their churches (really, they did). It was the late 1970s, and they talked a lot about the end times, about the days and things that will happen when Jesus returns. I had attended church all my life, the churches I had attended were mainstream northern protestant (Lutheran or Presbyterian), not charismatic evangelicals such as Baptist, Assemblies of God, or Pentecostal. I had never learned about any of this, and what they said scared the crap out of me, making me question whether I was good enough for Jesus.

I felt angry, upset at how they treated this end-times news as if it was some special information only they knew about. These teenagers tossed it around as if it was something cool, something given just to them, and when I started asking questions they responded with, "DON'T YOU KNOW THIS?" I didn't. That was the point when I gave up.

News flash: on our own, you and I AREN'T good enough for Jesus. We choose other things and separate ourselves from Him. But it isn't up to us to do things to become "good enough" for Him. We can't. He's already done everything necessary to repair our relationship. At the cross, He replaced our sin with His blood and our uncleanness with His purity. When His Father sees us, all He sees is Jesus covering one of His beloved children.

Here's a second news flash: this is for everyone. It isn't just for Christians or evangelicals. It isn't just for people who look or think like you, and it isn't just for the people you like. It isn't just for black people or white people, and it isn't just for Americans or Ugandans or underground believers who defy Communist China. Jesus is coming back and He's coming back with holy fire to make all things new, and He wants everyone to know so they can believe in Him first. It isn't a secret, and we aren't to act as if you need a secret handshake to know it. We aren't better than anyone just because we know it even if we may be better informed. Get with the program but don't be a jerk about it.

For further reading: Philippians 3:9, 1 Thessalonians 5:3, 2 Peter 3:7, 2 Kings 17:18, Isaiah 2:10, 2 Thessalonians 1:9.

Lord, help Me to witness for You today to everyone.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 12 July 2018

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. 2 Thessalonians 1:11 (NIV).

Confession time (again): yesterday I ended by saying “don’t be a jerk.” Don’t be a jerk about how you talk about Jesus. Walk the walk and talk the talk harmoniously. So here’s the confession: I’ve been a jerk about it. Online, in person, in any modality I have been a jerk. I haven’t been worthy of His calling to talk with you (and others) about Jesus. My witness has been words and actions and, to be honest, my witness has been discredited by other words and actions. Got skin, got sin, and, like Paul, I’m the worst of sinners.

Confession (again, again): every day, Jesus says “keep moving forward.” On my own, apart from Jesus, I can’t do or say anything about Him that’s meaningful. It’s His Spirit that places the good words in my mouth and moves me to work for Him with my hands. Where I am weak, Jesus steps in and injects His Spirit to strengthen me. Where I don’t know what to do or say, when I submit to Him, Jesus does those things. My sinful nature becomes His glorious appeal. It’s not me: it’s Jesus making me into who He wants me to be. It’s not a cop-out for: it’s how things really work.

That’s what Paul is saying in this verse. God makes us worthy of His calling. On our own, by our own motivations, we aren’t worthy of it. We aren’t worthy to even speak His name because we’ve chosen to sin against Him. On our own, our desires are only desires, and we are ruled by them, which is how the evil one keeps sneaking in and turning our focus.

Enter Jesus. Enter God into our lives and He makes all the difference. With Jesus in residence in your heart, the evil one is powerless. With Jesus inspiring my thoughts, my thoughts are inspired to become His words, to help and to encourage. With Him in our hearts, we can see when we’ve said and done wrong and turn from it, then try to make amends; to change. When He controls peoples’ actions, we don’t have to obsess about the things we’ve done wrong. You and I can focus, instead, on the great things He can do through us now.

I mess it up. I do that quite regularly; no excuses. To paraphrase Paul from Romans, the stupid things I don’t want to do, these I keep on doing. Yet I’m still who Jesus wants to work with to make me worthy of what He wants me to do, then equip me to do it.

For further reading: John 15:5, Romans 1:10, Romans 7:19, 2 Thessalonians 1:12.

Lord, mold and make me today to do Your will.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 17 July 2018

We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thessalonians 1:12 (NIV).

Someone close to me is currently being savagely attacked by the devil; I've written about this before. It's tough to watch, and while my family is praying for them, they're rebuffing our efforts to reach out, to prayerfully support, to help as we can. To be honest, we won't stop, because you don't stop fighting for the heart and soul of people you love. The way to fight for them is to pray to Jesus, even when the recipient of your efforts rejects both Him and you.

Why do this? So that the Lord Jesus may be glorified in them, and that they may be glorified in Him.

That's a crazy thing about faith: Jesus is glorified whether we do things or not. He's glorified because He's God, not because of our prayers or actions. I think it must be the thing that frustrates Satan and his duped followers most of all. No matter what they do, no matter how hard they try, no matter that evil may win a day and it seems like good is on the run, Jesus still triumphs in every possible ending. He still stands; He still reigns; He's still Lord, still always as He has been. Unharmful, unblemished, undaunted, undefeatable: no matter what terrible things may happen, in the end, Jesus is still glorified. When we praise Him, He reflects that glory through us.

That's another crazy thing about faith: no matter how bad we've gone, as long as we have breath, Jesus, in His glory, is still always calling to us. "Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling...calling o sinner come home." On our worst day when we feel most defeated and when we have done or said the most unspeakable things, Jesus is still there, His hand held out saying "take my hand and come back to peace." It's so illogical, so crazy in its implications, so super-human. You know: glorious.

It must really piss off Satan. Too bad.

When you care for someone, you don't give up. You don't let evil triumph in their life while you still have a way to help. A friend of mine wisely said, "there are some people you can help and some you can only pray for." That's where we are with this person we know: we can only pray for them because they've shut down and won't engage back in living. So we keep praying, and keep encouraging, and keep looking for openings where God clears paths to help in other ways. No matter what we do, Jesus is glorified. That makes it worthwhile.

For further reading: Isaiah 24:15, Philippians 2:9-11, 2 Thessalonians 2:1.

Lord, help everyone who so desperately needs Your love, peace, and encouragement. Help us to do reflect Your glory to others.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 18 July 2018

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us – whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter – asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 (NIV).

Scoffers and skeptics: they were old news even in Paul's time.

My Concordia says that the primary theme of 2 Thessalonians is the second coming of Jesus. It was written to people who knew first-hand, may have even seen, the first coming of Jesus (including Him after He was resurrected). They intimately knew about the miracle of Him. Quite understandably, they thought He would be coming back in the near-term, in their lifetimes. How shocked do you think they would be to learn that it has been over 2000 years since?

You couldn't blame them if there were some people who scoffed at the notion that Jesus would return from death. After all, nobody (but Him) ever said they would and had. The claims Paul and the other disciples were making about Jesus' coming return were fantastic and illogical (and that's no small matter given the widespread Greek culture of revering logic and knowledge). Jesus' first century resurrection had rocked the religious, political, social and even economic world in ways nothing else had throughout all of history. Yet the farther they, and we, get from Easter Sunday, the more our world seems to give credence to the scoffers who say it can never happen again. Many of them say, in fact, the first time never happened.

It makes no sense. When you're dead, you're dead. It's physically impossible. You're simply believing a fable. Get a grip already. A rotted, decomposed body can't live again. Fool. Would you hear those words today (or do you)? Admit it: you would have heard them in the AD 30s and after as well.

News flash, scoffers: the Bible hasn't been disproved. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the most thoroughly documented even in all of antiquity. Science and faith are seemingly mutually exclusive, but while science routinely disproves itself, faith in Jesus (and the veracity of the Scriptures) are consistent. They are supported by themselves and by faith in them. What's more, archaeology and proven history support more than deny the account of the life of Jesus. His words were and are reliable. Knowing that, is it unreliable to think they're true about everything, including his return? You know the answer.

Jesus came back once. He promised to do so again. His Word is reliable and honest. When the scoffers come, let them say what they will. It's only hot air and it's nothing new. They were trying to discredit Paul 2000 years ago and their modus operandi hasn't changed since.

For further reading: Mark 13:27, 1 Corinthians 1:8, 2 Timothy 2:18, 2 Thessalonians 2:2-3

Come Lord Jesus quickly.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 19 July 2018

Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 2 Thessalonians 2:3(NIV).

The most celebrated villain in history has already appeared and he's here among us now. He's you. He's me. He is antichrist.

It seems like a fantastic proposition, the stuff of apocalyptic fiction, yet Paul says it's true. Perhaps he will be a single person. John mentioned many "antichrists" meaning false leaders, people who lead others to reject Christ because he (and they) are anti-Christ, against Jesus Christ. Yet, in this verse, Paul mentions one man, the worst of the worst. It won't be Satan; it will be a human; verse 9 corroborates this. Millennialists and tribulation believers look for the coming of this one man as the definitive marker that humanity has entered the end times. They're probably right.

Yet you and I are men of lawlessness. You and I are against Christ. You and I are still steeped in our sins and daily rebelling against God. Hopefully we aren't leading legions of gullible people away from Jesus, but when we lead lives of hypocrisy we lead one or a few. When you think about it, that may be even worse. I'm a hypocrite; so are you; so is Pope Francis, Franklin Graham, your aunt Myrtle, and everyone we know.

We're sinful. We commit lawless acts every day, things that try to tear us away from the redemption of Jesus. As we get closer to the actual end times, things will get worse. Things that society used to forbid will become acceptable. Heinous events and unspeakable evils will become more and more common. People will lead lives that directly contradict even the small things Jesus taught. We will embrace petty evil and reject common good. Come to think of it, maybe we're in the end times after all.

Or maybe not. Yet in those coming days, the worst of the worst of humanity will rise up and cause unheard of destruction. Nuclear war, widespread murder, the most vile kinds of apostasy you can dream up: whatever it will be it will be awful. And the thoughts that give him birth are the ones that tempt and hurt each of us now. We side with the man of lawlessness with every sin we undertake. Our roles may not make us world leaders, but perhaps people are even more effective one on one, at a personal level. If we're anti-Christ, that can have deadly consequences.

The way out of that? Cling to Jesus; cling to faith in Him. Do whatever it takes to turn from temptations by growing closer to God. Turn our everyday lawlessness to everyday righteousness by letting Him make that change in us. And that's a tougher road to follow.

For further reading: Mark 13:5, Matthew 24:10-12, Daniel 7:25, Revelation 13:5-6, 2 Thessalonians 2:4, 9

Again, come Lord Jesus and quickly.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 23 July 2018

He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. 2 Thessalonians 2:4 (NIV).

More about the man of lawlessness, the antichrist who will rise to power in the end of days and set Himself against God.

Repeat after me: damned fool. Literally. Here, in this context, it isn't cussing: it's the truth.

I said yesterday that we are men of lawlessness, and we are. With every sin we choose over Jesus, we set ourselves up as anti-Christ, as against Him. If you don't believe you're sinful & lawless, tell me: who knows better how to make decisions for your life: you or the God you've heard about, and known, your entire life but never seen, touched, or sensed other than spiritually? You know the trick: if you had even a hint of a thought of "I do," you're rebellious, you're sinful. One sin separates you from God. It could be simply saying "no" when He tells you something you don't want to hear, or it could be murder one. You're sinful and your sin separates you from God's perfection.

But you aren't THAT man of lawlessness. Every one of our sins is actually two sins. One is the actual transgression and the other is idolatry. Every sin sets ourselves up as God, as knowing better than Jesus. Every sin gives Him the finger.

But not like THAT man.

In the last days, anti-Christ, whoever he will be, will set himself up as a god, lying and saying he is God. He will do miraculous things, be compelling in word and manner, and be a truly remarkable person. His fancy magic tricks will deceive many, and many will be brought into his sphere of influence because of their willfulness to reject God and their willingness to be easily fooled. Many people will think he is God and that he is God incarnate, come to live with us.

But he won't be. When the man of lawlessness doesn't come back for all to see the way Jesus promised to, then he will prove he isn't God. Jesus told us how He would return and He meant it. This imposter won't be Jesus and it'll cost you to say that. In those last days, it'll be tough to stand up against the millions, maybe even billions, of people who will accept anti-Christ as their god. Standing up against the man of lawlessness and his minions will cause you to be persecuted, maybe even killed.

So be ready. Be ready to stand up for Jesus now. "That man" is going to put you in his gunsights. Yet all he does will simply condemn him to eternal punishment. He's over before he starts. He'll be a damned fool.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 8:5, Isaiah 14:13-14, Ezekiel 28:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:5

Lord Jesus, strengthen me to stand against lawlessness, to humble myself and repent.

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Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 24 July 2018

Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? 2 Thessalonians 2:5 (NIV).

Awhile ago, a minister friend of mine told me he doesn't think we're near the end of time because the Gospel hasn't yet been preached to the entire world. That's one of the conditions Jesus established before He returned to heaven: that His Gospel would be preached to the entire world, to the ends of the earth, so that all might hear of Him before He returns to reclaim His followers. My friend said that there were still millions of people who haven't heard about this Jesus. Knowing that, he said it can't possibly be time just yet. I hadn't ever considered this, but his point was simple and compelling.

And then there are the family members I've mentioned over the last month or two. They don't know much about Jesus, and what they do know they have rejected. To them, Jesus is just some mumbo jumbo myth that a bunch of weak-minded dupes with a daddy complex put their misbegotten faith in. To them, Jesus is just a psychological let-down. Yet whether it's by ignorance or rejection (itself a form of stark ignorance), they don't know Jesus and are, well, out in the cold if the world ends today.

Wouldn't you like to have sat around the hearth with Paul and just listened? Or maybe not? I mean, it sounds like his conversations were deep, weighty stuff. Paul made tents for a living and instead of talking about his latest Eddie Bauer creation, he would talk with his friends about the end of the world. From the sound of this verse, he talked a lot about it, about how the man of lawlessness would come and set himself against the Lord. To Paul, it was deadly serious business.

What would the Thessalonians do if they didn't know about Jesus, about the peace and hope only He can offer? What WILL you or I do?

Fact is, most of their world didn't know about Jesus. And that is still a fact today. Most of our world hasn't heard about Him, or they don't know much about Him, or they have heard about Him but our behaviors and attitudes turned them off. But whether it's conscious or ignorant, if someone doesn't know then they don't know.

What will we do to change that situation? Will we do what we can to be good witnesses, to use our talents to be kind, to help others? Will our lives point to Him or away from Him? If you've heard about Jesus and rejected Him (or are apathetic), you're playing Russian roulette with your soul. You're living in damning ignorance. What will you believe today? It's a heavy topic, and we may or may not be near the end, but will you take that chance?

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 3:4, 2 Thessalonians 2:6

Lord, help me to believe and share this belief!

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 25 July 2018

And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 (NIV).

Have you ever considered that God holds back evil so that it won't overcome us but, instead, so that we might overcome it by relying fully on God's grace and hope?

It's tough to respond to someone who's going through something tough. When your spouse dies, when you're robbed, when you're facing divorce, when you lose your job, when the doctors tell you about a brain tumor, when the bank takes your house, when your kid goes to prison, when you just don't understand why so many bad things happen: what do we do when these happen? Sometimes we just don't know what to do or say.

You know, then, that perhaps the best thing we can do in those times is to be kind, to honestly "be there" for the afflicted person. To listen, hug, cry with them, take on their burden, help them carry their hurt; to encourage without being selfish or foolish. That's what Jesus did; maybe He's calling you to do it with someone you know.

Don't lose sight of the fact that Jesus is at work in their lives (and yours) through that which afflicts. He's restraining evil from all the terrible things it could do. He's only allowing evil to refine us, to challenge us so that faith in Jesus might increase. So that others may come to know Him better. So that He might reach out through us and He might save more in this way.

He does this now because, at some point, that's going to matter even more. At some time, the sand is going to run out of the hourglass and time will be over. When that happens, God will stop holding back evil. When God pulls back His protective hand, evil will rise as the man of lawlessness and perpetrate even greater harm on humanity than has ever been done before. The terror of death will sting everything about daily life, then, and those alive at that time will need to know Jesus even closer.

Yet for now, God is holding that back. The man of lawlessness, defeated before his rise, hasn't appeared on the scene. For now, he exists only in the sins that plague us and try to turn our focus away from God. God is restraining evil in our lives so that we won't be overcome by it but will, instead, overcome it daily and bring glory to Him. Perhaps we should thank Him more for this.

For further reading: 2 Thessalonians 2:8.

Lord God, I praise You for holding back evil in my life. Help me to give You increasing glory and honor in all I am.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 26 July 2018

And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 (NIV).

Before moving on from these verses, let's hone in on the last nine words of them: "till he is taken out of the way."

Because of Jesus, you're a part of eternity right now, right here, because you accepted what He's done. Jesus made that possible; Jesus did it all so that, at the end of this life but also throughout it now, you're eternal. You're guaranteed. You're reaping the benefits of Jesus' eternity through a remade heart, life, and possibilities. You aren't going to be held back by terrible things you've said and done, and you get to reap the benefits of Jesus living through you as He reaches for others.

What about that man of lawlessness? You do realize that he's eternal, too. He's a person, whoever he is or will be, just like you and me. He will have chosen a different eternity, however. His will be one of torment. He wills that torment into this temporal world so that he might use his life to tear others away from Jesus. When this life is over for him, he'll have an eternity of crushing regret ahead of him.

Fool. Like I said the other day, a damned fool, truly condemned to the pitiful eternity away from the heart of love that is Jesus.

The foolish man of lawlessness has already been eternally defeated. There's nothing he can do, nothing he can say, that will change this already pre-determined fate. He will crave to be God and his craving will go unanswered. Jesus and the armies of the good living God will overcome him and defeat all his ways. What's more, he only thinks he can defeat Jesus, only thinks he can tear others away. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus, not even all the terrible things done by this man of lawlessness. We can give up Jesus, forswear Him; that's true. But there is absolutely nothing anyone or anything can do that will force us to do so. That key distinction is the distinction between you and hell. That fine line keeps you on the side of Christ instead of joining in with the forces of darkness.

Thus, the man of lawlessness has no power over you unless you let him. Just say no;" Nancy Reagan would be proud. That man of lawlessness has already been defeated. Even his thoughts are futile. When the time is just right, Jesus will permanently move him out of the way in advance of a most excellent way.

For further reading: Romans 8:38-39, 1 Corinthians 13, 2 Thessalonians 2:8.

Come Lord Jesus quickly!

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 30 July 2018

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. 2 Thessalonians 2:8 (NIV).

In the final battle, it won't take much to defeat evil. Jesus will defeat the lawless one with His Word alone, and I expect it will be an underwhelming but overpowering thing to behold. The armies of heaven will be lined up behind Jesus, beautiful angels armed for battle. And millions of people will stand with Him against the millions of hostile unbelievers and demons who oppose Him. Yet Jesus will do the fighting. He'll do it the way He created everything: by words, by speaking it to be so. Evil will be powerless against those words, and it will be defeated by them.

Here's another truth for right now: evil is defeated by you and I in the same way.

You and I live in the present, here on the fallen Third Rock, and evils plague us every day. We overcome them with the breath of our mouths. Our words, which are actually Jesus' words, do the work. Sometimes that work is as simple as tiny words; sometimes it's a 500 word blog. Sometimes it's an argument, or a long-winded discussion. When you speak in love, God's Spirit speaks through you with power and resolve. It speaks against evil and overcomes the darkness of evil with Jesus' light. Be a friend; honestly love someone; share kindness; pitch in and help: you're standing in line with Jesus and He is battling evil through you today.

Think about that light, too. That light, that shining love, is the splendor of Jesus' return. When He returns, all the world will see it and it will be the most spectacular sight ever. Yet we get glimpses of it every time we convey His love. Look at your grandkids; look at your spouse. Enjoy a sunset with friends; speak truth. Be that friend. Every time we share the love God gives us we are sharing the splendor of Him who brings heaven to earth. Shining splendor will be the hallmark of the moment when Christ returns yet we can share it here and now with people who desperately need to see it. That's a thing of marvelous beauty.

It isn't popular today to consider that evil is real, but it is. It's as present today as it ever was in Bible times, even as it lies to us using better technology. The way to stand against it, against the man of lawlessness, too, is the same as it was all those centuries ago. Lift up Jesus. Side with Jesus. Invite Jesus into your life and get to know Him. Stand with Jesus, then let Him do the talking. It will be magnificent to behold.

For further reading: Isaiah 11:4, Revelation 2:16, Revelation 19:16, Luke 17:30, 2 Thessalonians 2:9.

Lord, speak for me today and battle evil as we confront it together.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 31 July 2018

The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10 (NIV).

Are you easily deceived?

Cards on the table time: I'm easily duped. I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer when it comes to discerning peoples' intentions. I'm quick to trust and sometimes quick to put my trust in people and things that I shouldn't. I'm also somewhat co-dependent, and that can make for a poisonous mixture if we aren't careful. Yet I believe in God without question and believe that, if the lawless one arrives during my life, I'd be able to summon the neurons to perceive and reject him. Yet would that be the case?

So many people today are tempted to cry out "God, why do you let this happen to me" when things go wrong for them. Cancer, financial struggles, joblessness, divorce, temptations, loneliness, mental struggles: every time something plagues us it's so easy to blame God first before getting down to the nub of what's actually happening. I wonder how many who are quick to blame God would be easily deceived by the evil one when the man of lawlessness begins to reveal himself.

If the 'man of lawlessness' doesn't appear in the exact way Jesus said He Himself would, then the man of lawlessness will have revealed himself to be the fraud he really is. It won't be hard to tell. False Christ? Man of lawlessness. Unexplainable miracles that don't attribute to God? Man of lawlessness. Takes credit for things seemingly miraculous things he didn't do? Man of lawlessness (or candidate for Congress). Flowery words without substance, leading people down primrose paths, the left hand not matching what the right one does: man of lawlessness (or another politician).

And many will believe him. Willingly. Enthusiastically.

People are so hungry for meaning that they will jump at the first chance they see, thinking they are placing their faith wisely when, in fact, they're laying it at the feet of a devil. Billions of people alive in that day will believe in that person and think he is Christ incarnate when, in fact, he won't be. Will you be one of them? Are you easily deceived?

The way to know is to follow the word of God. Get to know Christ one on one. Converse with Him. Read about Him. Make Him a priority. Follow Him. Trust. When you do those things, it'll be easy to tell the difference between the real thing and a phony imitation.

For further reading: Matthew 4:10, Matthew 24:24, Revelation 13:13, John 4:48, 1 Corinthians 1:18, Proverbs 4:6, John 3:17-19, 2 Thessalonians 2:11.

Lord, help me always to cleave close to You and to examine all things through Your words.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 1 August 2018

For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12 (NIV).

Tough words to understand and even tougher ones to hear. Does God set us up for failure? Does He cause us to not believe? Of course not, but read these two verses without reading anything else and it would seem that way. Yet, even while doing verse-by-verse exegetical hermeneutics (now THERE is a phrase!), we can't forget context.

Don't forget that these two verses come in the context of discussing the man of lawlessness. At the time of the end, it'll become even more apparent that God provides us with EVERYTHING, including opportunities of testing. You and I don't have to do the things we do. Nobody forces you or I to go to work, or argue with our spouse, or get up at 5 AM. In survival training the instructors teach you that "you can win a battle of wills but not a battle of wits." Nobody can force you to say or do anything, and deep inside of you, nobody can take away your faith unless you let them.

God does indeed test us, yet those tests are refining, not destructive. They are to build us up and bring out our character. That faith nobody can steal? God does indeed put us in situations to refine it, enhance it, strengthen it, teach us to lean on Him more. Is it surprising, then, that God would also test those who reject Him, allowing them to steep in the powerful delusion of unbelief so that even they might find Him waiting there? Every day of our lives, God provides us with (at a minimum) life, breath, and body. He does these things (and much more) to plainly make known how He loves us and wants to always provide for us. Even folks who reject Him.

Thus it's also plain how He provides the means to condemn those who reject Him. "I don't need you" one might say. So God turns them over to the consequences of their choice (even as He still gives life, breath and more). The lawless one will make himself plainly known, and the plain proof of that is found in Scripture. We have all we need to also plainly tell the difference between him and the real Jesus. For those who look at the two and choose the lawless one, they make the choice fully knowing the alternative. After all, as C.S. Lewis said, "the gates of hell are locked from the inside." That's a tough survival test to willfully fail but the failure won't be on God.

For further reading: Romans 1:28, Romans 1:32, Romans 2:8, Matthew 24:5, Mark 13:5, 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

Lord, You make Yourself so plainly known to us. Help us to always choose wisely.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 8 August 2018

But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 2 Thessalonians 2:13 (NIV).

Firstfruits: there's a 'churchy' word that, I'll admit, I had no knowledge (or caring) of until I started diving deeper into faith. To be honest, it seems like a dumb concept if you don't believe in Jesus. If you make beer, wine, or distilled spirits, the very first thing out of the spout is thrown away. If you raise laying hens, very often the first eggs are small. If you garden, very often the first vegetables you pick are scrawny.

In that light, "first" seems like a puny measure if that's as far as we take it.

Instead, "first" is a thing of the heart. Put God first. Put Him before personal gain, personal profit, personal anything. Be willing to give to God even if it's all you get to do. If the only thing you get in your harvest is a single fruit, be willing to give it to God. Most of all, be willing to be the tithe, not just to give the tithe.

Huh? More churchy thoughts, right? Only partly. Anyone can understand this.

Perhaps 1 Thessalonians 5:9 says it best: (to paraphrase) God didn't make us for suffering but, instead, for His grace and love. He gave up His Son, Jesus, so that we might be the firstfruits of His harvest. In Bible times, the first fruits were dedicated to God. They were the best someone had to give, the truest representation of what a person worked hard, believed in, and strived to produce. God asks for that from us (and in us). Knowing that we can't give or be firstfruits on our own, He gave Jesus to become that for us.

And He still does. He still gives His Spirit to people all over the world so that they may learn to give the first, best love from their hearts to Him. In turn, He shares that love and spreads it, through His Spirit, all around the world. When people come to believe in the truth of Christ, things change. Attitudes change; hearts change; living patterns change; habits change. When God's Spirit goes to work in us, He remakes us into the first, best thing He wants: a loving disciple of Jesus. And then we get to work, sharing Him as we do so that others might become firstfruits like us.

Churchy or not, that's a good thing.

For further reading: Romans 1:8, Ephesians 1:4, 1 Thessalonians 5:9, 1 Peter 1:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:14.

Lord, help me to be Your firstfruits for people who don't yet know You.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 9 August 2018

He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thessalonians 2:14 (NIV).

My daughter got married over the weekend. The dress, the cake, the dancing, the reception, the walk down the aisle: it was time for the whole shootin match. If I do say so, it was a great party where everyone (over 150 people) had a wonderful time. Check out the Youtube of just before the bride walked: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LDOH8OB3hI>

But big fancy weddings aren't why we're here.

And over the weekend, too, we also had a party for my wife, who has a milestone birthday this month. At the VRBO we rented, a large group of family and friends gathered to celebrate her birthday, our fellowship, and just enjoying life (and Texas barbecue) together. Again, if I do say so, it was another great time, a great birthday bash!

But that's not why we are here.

Big parties, our jobs, our churches, shopping at the mall (or at the grocery store), working hard in school, the next big vacation: none of those are why you and I are here. We are called to enjoy life and to be good stewards of all the things that God gives us to do. We are motivated, even inspired, to do our best in all things, and that is a good thing, even a Godly thing.

But NONE of those are what we are called to in this life. In all of them, we can indeed give glory to God, and we can even share in His glory through doing them. But make no mistake about it: we aren't called to DO things here just for the sake of doing them. We aren't called to simply live, even if living means a rich, full, eventful, or moral life.

We are called to serve in God's kingdom through faith in Jesus. We are called to believe in Jesus in everything we do. We are called to share this belief, this faith in His saving death and resurrection, by living it out. We are called through the gospel, given to men like Paul, Matthew, Peter, John and others, to share Jesus with what we say and do so that others who don't know – or reject – Him might come to know Him too (and then repeat the cycle with even more others). In doing these things, we share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ because that's how we do the work of the God who sent Him.

I loved the wedding; I loved the party. I love time with family, friends, and even strangers. But without Jesus, they're just meaningless events. There's no morality without Jesus, nothing good. Involving Him transforms life into something more, something meaningful, something we are called to live.

For further reading: Romans 8:28, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 2 Thessalonians 2:15.

Lord Jesus, thank You for faith, for letting me share You in all these ways.

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Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 10 August 2018

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. 2 Thessalonians 2:15 (NIV).

Why should we hold onto teachings of a bunch of old, dead, white guys?

That's a refrain you hear a lot in our popular culture these days. Mostly it concerns the US Constitution, written over 200 years ago by (now) old, dead, white guys; as if being old or Caucasian alone would either qualify or disqualify someone as reputable. It's a stupid argument, really, that we should ignore something because the authors aren't alive anymore or because they were of a certain race. It's foolish.

Yet that same argument is used to justify ignoring the teachings of the Bible. After all, they're much older than the Constitution. And the men who wrote them were men (sexism!) and if not white they were at least Mediterranean and Semitic in nature (racists!). The purveyors of foolishness would have people believe that being male, white, Semitic, or aged should disqualify things they say. Perhaps that would qualify much of Hollywood and the leaders of popular culture as well...but I digress.

Instead, here's a chance to ignore all of what those around us would say and stand up for Jesus. There's an old hymn that says just that: stand up, stand up for Jesus. Stand up today. Stand up for what you believe instead of being talked down by the vapid arguments of people with other agendas. More importantly than standing up, though, stand firm. Be firm and resolute in saying "I believe." Every day is a new opportunity to be your own Martin Luther and say "here I stand" by basing your stand in your belief in Christ.

That isn't easy, especially when the small minds of popular culture have a loud voice. When academia, media, and even corporate culture are standing against you. When it's easier to give in. When so many evangelicals make standing up for Jesus a difficult, unpopular, and corny thing. Our world is hostile to this faith; 2 Thessalonians spends much of its verbiage talking about how faith will be challenged at the end of all things. Of how the world will do what it's doing to believers, many of whom overseas are being physically martyred for standing up for Jesus.

Stand anyway.

Stand firm in knowing that who you're standing for, what you believe, and the Savior who makes it possible is standing beside you. He is with you in Spirit and inside you. The strength to stand is the strength of God's Spirit coursing through your veins. You may be basing your faith on the words of old, dead, white guys, yet those words are given from God Almighty Himself: He who has no age, eternal life, no race, and is never foolish.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 16:13, 2 Thessalonians 2:16.

Lord, I stand for You, for Your love, Your peace, Your strength, Your kingdom.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 13 August 2018

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 (NIV).

Have you noticed that Paul likes flowery benedictions? He does this in most of his letters; why? Simple: praise and encouragement.

In these verses, (as you can see) that theme of encouragement is especially prevalent. Think about it: in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he spent considerable time teaching about patterns of living in a pagan world (which was what Asia Minor largely was). In this second letter, Paul used his time to talk about the end of times and the persecution that would happen. Persecution was a subject his friends in Thessalonica would understand because they lived in a Roman world hostile to the nascent Christian faith. Their city was a cosmopolitan trade hub, the largest city between Rome and Byzantium and they saw first-hand the worst the Empire could offer. They were familiar with the brutality lashed out against anyone who 'made waves.' And they were familiar with people who had known Jesus of Nazareth personally, had seen and heard Him, in person and had followed Him and His teachings in the few short decades since He departed.

If you or I lived in first century Asia Minor, we might need some encouragement, too.

That's why Paul moves to end his letter this way. He gives praise to God, stating the reason we should do so ("who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope"), then prays encouragement over the reader (the rest of the verse).

By the time Paul ministered to the new church in Thessalonica, that city was already almost 400 years old; today it is nearly 2400 years old and is the second largest city in Greece. His friends there understood that they would need to praise God and be encouraged in the time to come because persecution would indeed come. Within 20 years, all the apostles except one would be murdered (including Paul), and the church scattered. Those who held onto believing in this Jesus would need to focus on praising Him in adversity while being encouraged by constantly learning and re-learning the truth of His encouragement.

Two millenia later, have things really changed? Thessalonica is still a major city. Some people still follow Jesus while most of the world does not. People overseas are still dying for Christian faith and people here are blacklisted for it. And the gospel is still on the move, teaching about God's grace and His eternal encouragement of how His eternity matters most here and in the here to come. I'd say Paul's flowery benediction has served well.

For further reading: Philippians 4:20, John 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 3:2, 2 Thessalonians 3:1.

Lord Jesus, thank You for these words you inspired Paul to share. Let them encourage people to faith in You today.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 14 August 2018

As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. 2 Thessalonians 3:1 (NIV).

If you study the spread of Christianity, you see that Paul's prayer was answered. A word of mouth proposition, Christianity spread all over the known world in a matter of a few years. That's unprecedented. The faiths of the Norse, Japanese, and indigenous tribes in the Americas never spread out of local areas due to many factors. Already an established faith at the time of Jesus, it took hundreds of years for Buddhism to spread beyond India. It also took many decades for Islam to spread out of Arabia and then it happened only through violence. Yet it took only a handful of years for the message of Jesus Christ to spread from Jerusalem to Assyria, Greece, Asia Minor and all over the Roman Empire. Within only a few decades, it spread into pagan Europe and up into India.

Good news travels fast.

Mark Twain and Winston Churchill were right: A lie gets halfway around the world before truth puts on its boots. Bad news travels fast, too, especially if you're on the internet. Yet I maintain that good news travels faster. Bad times don't last but they hurt while they're here. Yet when good news travels and takes root, it's there for good. True, we can misplace that good news but when it travels fast, it travels fast while establishing itself.

The good news of the Good News took root wherever it went. Moreover, it took root in the face of adversity. It traveled by word of mouth along ancient roads and trade routes. It sailed the Mediterranean, the Adriatic, and across the Black Sea. It climbed mountains and was spoken across language barriers giving new-found hope to those who would open their hearts. People accustomed to the family of Greek and Roman Gods and the plethora of ancient tribal deities heard, for the first time, that the God of all loved them. That He forgave their sins, and wanted to live through their hearts and hands. Revenge was replaced with hope; hope could finally spring eternal.

And all because people talked with each other. Because people took Paul's letters and shared them, preserved them, used them as a way to get to know this Jesus. Because God answered Paul's prayer. Word traveled fast. It still does today. If you don't believe that, consider that, in less than 4 decades, over 200 million people have come to faith in the dictatorship of Communist China. In the years to come, there could (and probably will be) more Christians there than anywhere else on earth. Good news travels fast and it can put down deep roots even in the harshest soil.

For further reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:8, 2 Thessalonians 3:2.

Lord, I praise You for Your word traveling fast!

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 15 August 2018

And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. 2 Thessalonians 3:2 (NIV).

Not long ago I was staying at a home of a friend who has embraced evil. In rejecting God he has replaced Him with evil and invited it into his home. Now, I've always been skeptical of 'haunted houses.' They're a Halloween gimmick and I never fully accepted the idea of evil living in one place...that is until I stayed there. I've never truly felt such hopelessness, such rage, terror and loneliness, such sadness in a single place as I did staying a few days in this friend's room.

There was a sinister poster on the wall; I was told from a video game. The owner kept books about darkness there; books about hating God, about dark arts, about Satanist Aleister Crowley, about philosophy. It was as if my friend is stewing his mind in twisted ideologies to find meaning. I was told he didn't read these things but why have them if not to use them somehow? In my way of thinking, it's impossible to keep something this grotesque around you and not be affected by it.

"For not everyone has faith."

I couldn't wait to get out of there. I warned the owner of the house that they needed to face this and do something about it. And I was harshly confronted by another member of the household in an attack I can only attribute to their vulnerability to a misunderstood evil. When I left, I called my wife, overcome, and we spent the next half hour talking while I was in tears.

Have you ever encountered such a thing? I know people who have conducted real exorcisms. I have seen first-hand the result of what unabashed evil can do to a family. I once saw my own grandmother seemingly transform through her eyes, in a matter of minutes, from placidness to manic panic in a fashion I could only think of as possession. She was a woman of faith, yet evil in that moment overcame her.

I write these blog posts to, in my way, share the Gospel of Jesus with you. That's a call I believe God put on my heart, and it's the motivation that keeps me doing them. I know that some who read them don't believe in Jesus, haven't learned about Jesus, and some have even rejected Jesus. Yet God hasn't rejected them and He sends people like me and you to them to witness with how we live our lives. The popular phrase is that believers are to be in the world but not of the world. Yet here in the world, to not be of it, we constantly need God's help to deliver us from evil as He Himself once said. In advance of that help, we must pray.

For further reading: Romans 15:31, 2 Thessalonians 3:3.

Lord, strengthen me to stand against evil then deliver me from it.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 16 August 2018

And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. 2 Thessalonians 3:2-3 (NIV).

Not everyone has faith. Now comes the story of the grand jury in Pennsylvania that is accusing dozens of Catholic priests of molesting hundreds of boys and girls.

God strengthens and protects us from the evil one.

Perhaps that's strange to say in light of that headline. Physically speaking, God didn't protect those kids from the monsters who assaulted them (nor did He protect them from the church that covered it up). Emotionally, God didn't protect them from the terror and anguish that resulted from their being preyed upon. So what do we really mean?

God can indeed strengthen and protect us from the evil one. In the aftermath of these accusations, the people who were violated are still loved by Jesus. He is still there with them, in their hearts, His Spirit working through their lives to build back from those terrible things.

There's an almost callous side to saying that God doesn't promise to prevent evil things from happening to us. It gives tacit acknowledgement to the folks who say "God, why did you let this happen?" Evil does happen, and God does tolerate it yet only so that His larger purposes may be satisfied, even those that involve our pain.

Where God strengthens us is where it matters most: in the soul. Deep inside, where the heart and soul are one, where our character and beliefs reside, where faith goes to work is where God strengthens us. Sure, it's His decision to strengthen our soul and our bodies at the same times; His choice, not mine. But even if the body is wrecked by evil, the soul can stand strong through the God who gives us all things.

Let's be frank: we usually want more. Sometimes (maybe even most times) we want God to both strengthen our spirit and strengthen our body. We're telling God "you aren't doing what I want." It's really saying "you don't measure up, God." It's a subtle idolatry; got skin, got sin. Despite it, God still protects us from evil. Satan is wily and talented. There are more ways than we can know that he can mess us up, yet they don't happen. It isn't chance or coincidence: it's God's protection. Even though we are rebellious, God still provides strength inside and protection outside, even for those who reject Him. He gives us the strong power of free will, of "yes" and "no." He does it as long as we live.

Praying that God strengthens the victims of heinous crimes done by people of trust who gave in to something evil.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 1:9, Matthew 5:37, 2 Thessalonians 3:4.

Lord, praise to You for your strength and protection. Thanks for giving me both!

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Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 20 August 2018

We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. 2 Thessalonians 3:4 (NIV).

At some point, the rubber meets the road; you know that metaphor. Some day you graduate and go out into the world to use what you're learned. At some point (usually called "go-live") your project completes and whatever you were working towards is done, or complete, or in use.

In life, that point is called "today." Even if you don't believe in Jesus, you're living today. You're experiencing things; you're making decisions and choices; you're acting and reacting. Bad things happen out of the blue: people die, storms hit, unemployment happens. And let's not be Downer Dave all day: Good things happen too, like promotions, credit increases, births, weddings, "I love you's."

Focus in on that last one, especially. Paul says in Romans that "we face death all day long." Any of a thousand things could kill us every moment of every day. An acquaintance of mine got sick just last Tuesday and died on Thursday. Yet, in the middle of their grief, her family soon gathered to focus on the "I love you" moments in her life, and they were many. When we walk away from the cemetery and our loved one is still there in that cold ground, we carry their "I love you's" with us. They matter more than the loss, or the grave, or the grief.

Paul said in today's verse that he and his companions had confidence the Thessalonians were following God's commands. That they were letting the Spirit remake their hearts and minds. That their actions demonstrated this. That they were strengthened deep inside, where it matters most, at a fundamental level, by their faith in this God-man, Jesus. Paul had confidence in this not to salve his own vanity but, instead, because his faith was based in "I love you." Specifically, God in Christ saying "I love you" from the cross so much that he bled and died to prove it and make sure we could share in it forever.

He did that because of today. Because He knew His followers and His opponents lived today. Because He knew you and I thousands of years before we were born and He wanted us to know "I love you" when our today's came around. Jesus gave us words by men like Paul so that we would remake our lives around His example and come to better know – and share – Him.

Not everyone knows Him; not everyone has faith. Satan attacks in hundreds of ways every day. Evil is still here death always threatens. At some point today, you'll meet the road and venture forth. Good and bad will come our way. Wherever we go, Jesus is alongside saying "I love you."

For further reading: Romans 8:36, 2 Thessalonians 3:5.

Lord Jesus, all praise to You for Your love, for abiding with me, for today.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 21 August 2018

May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance. 2 Thessalonians 3:5 (NIV).

Is this circular reasoning? If God is the foundation, the starting point, of human reason, isn't it a circular (and thus invalid) cycle of reasoning to say that God directs our heart into His own love because He's also the conclusion of our reasoning?

We can't come to God unless God has first come to us. Face it: it's true. You and I may not like that fact but it's still a fact. Your heartbeat didn't start on its own: God gave you life. In fact, nothing that is alive became so without God. Science can create the substance that supports, even runs, life, but it cannot create life itself in man, plant, or any creature. Only God does that.

It's almost as if God is life and life is only of God. This is most certainly true; another way of saying that is "amen."

Because that's the way it is.

May the Lord direct our hearts into His love because His love directs our hearts in all we may be. It does seem a bit circular because that, too, is just the way it is. This verse echoes Ezra, who (tradition holds) wrote 1 Chronicles. In chapter 29, verse 18 King David says, "keep these desires and thoughts in the hearts of your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to you." He is passing the kingdom to his son, Solomon, and he is praying that the Lord actively keep the hearts of His chosen people attuned to Him. David, and later Paul, knew that people, on their own, could not hold fast to God without God's help.

It was so then; it is so now. Got skin, got sin. Because that's the way it is...it's the way it always is.

You can't come to God unless God first comes to you. That moment when you feel peace? It's God coming to you. The "aha moment" you have when you figure out something? God. An interest to know more, or how something from the Bible touches you in a way nothing else does? God and God again. He sends His Spirit to work on us, and work through us, because He who created human nature best understands it. Not everyone believes in God; not everyone did in Ezra's time either (or King David's), yet God still believes in every one person, then and now.

To prove it, He comes to us first. Always.

We may not fully understand it. Nobody fully, truly understands everything about the Lord. Yet He understands us, and He understands our needs; what we need to survive, to succeed. First above all other needs, He knows we need Him most. Because that's the way it is.

For further reading: 1 Chronicles 29:18, 2 Thessalonians 3:6.

Lord, you come to us first. You reach us where we are. Thank You for that.

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Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 4 September 2018

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. 2 Thessalonians 3:6 (NIV).

My son told me a story. He hasn't practiced much formal religion in the last few years but he has constantly believed. Indeed, he has been trying to live out his rollercoaster faith in a rollercoaster world. Some days are more devout; some are the opposite. He told me that, last week, he prayed to meet new people, for he and his fiancé to meet new couples and make new friends. Later that same day he was outside his apartment and met a man and his wife who were moving in. He ended up helping them finish the move and they became friends. Answered prayer, answered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then there is another family member, who is an unbeliever. He starts school today, starting his senior year. He's openly hostile to God and, to be honest, is confronted by the works of the devil everywhere he turns. This boy not only doesn't believe: he despises God for reasons only he could fully explain. I'm betting, though, that some of those reasons would sound familiar. He has asked to not be included on family bible verses, or spiritual messages, or things that are about faith, so I respect his wishes and don't send them. Yet I pray for him in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that he would be broken in heart and turn to the Lord to be remade.

A prayer to the Lord is a prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul invokes this phrase for emphasis, to stress to the Thessalonians – and us – that we are to keep away from people who are idle (not idol) in faith. People whose faith is weak need encouragement, and we should indeed encourage, pray for, and work in their lives to build that up. Yet we should be careful to not always hitch our faith-star to theirs for our own spiritual welfare. A therapist friend says there are people we should help and people we should simply pray for. That's good advice.

Yet we are to temper this judiciousness with the boldness of the Lord Jesus Christ to be in the world but not of it. We are to run to the fire when someone's spiritual fire is dying out. We are to live our lives in the fruits of Jesus' Spirit not to earn our salvation but to reflect His. There are some people we need to help beyond just prayer. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that's our mission as well.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 5:4, Romans 16:17, 2 Thessalonians 3:7.

Lord Jesus, help me to know who to pray for and who, in Your Name, to help.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 5 September 2018

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8 (NIV).

Rush Limbaugh is fond of telling the true story of Thanksgiving. He even wrote a children's book about it. Without diving into politics, the gist of the story is this: the Pilgrims resorted to the concept of trusting God while "working for one's self" in matters of earning a living and providing food to eat. They had tried communal pooling of everything and nearly starved. The next season, they scrapped this socialistic approach, accepted help from friendly Indians, and began to practice free-market capitalism. This soon thrived. At the end of the growing year, they held a giant feast to thank God and celebrate all the ways He had provided for them. Within a few years, the indebted Pilgrims had repaid in full the English and Dutch sponsors who had been their financial backers.

It seems the Pilgrims put 2 Thessalonians 3 into practice.

Now, even I am not going to try to justify capitalism with the Bible. Instead, let's focus on the idea that God gives us talents to provide for us. Further, especially when in the company of strangers, He gives us talents and abilities to prove ourselves to these strangers so that His word may spread from credible sources. Paul was a tentmaker and worked as such to earn his way in Thessalonica so that his expenses and living wouldn't be a burden to newly-made friends and believers. He would pay his own way so that he would also have the available resources to continue his ministry unimpeded.

All because he could work using the talent that God gave him. Paul could earn a living, spend his earnings on Kingdom work, and thrive. Sounds pretty capitalist to me.

Again, my purpose isn't to defend capitalist, though the combination of freedom, capitalism, and Judeo Christian fundamentals have done more to advance the human condition than anything else in all of human history. Instead, this is a reminder that God gives you interests, talents, knowledge, abilities as a means to provide for you. Like to play video games? Figure out a way to make a living at it. Like to write? Write a blog or a book and sell them. Good with wood-working? Make furniture and sell it. Paul and Rush would agree: what you're doing is actually glorifying God by using what He gave you for His good.

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 4:16, Acts 18:3, Ephesians 4:28, 2 Thessalonians 3:9.

Lord, thank You and I praise You for the talents you give to me. Help me today to use them to your glory and for my godly benefit as well as to benefit others around me.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 6 September 2018

We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." 2 Thessalonians 3:9-10 (NIV).

Yesterday I mentioned Rush Limbaugh's account of Thanksgiving. How those who would eat would work to provide for themselves, using the gifts God had given to them. In other places in history, this same tenet – no work, no eat – has also been invoked; did those who did so realize they were echoing the Apostle Paul? According to Wikipedia John Smith said it in Jamestown in 1609 when he said "You must obey this now for a law, that he that will not work shall not eat (except by sickness he be disabled)." 300 years later, Lenin encapsulated the idea into the Russian Constitution of 1918 (and also later in the 1936 Soviet Constitution, written years after Lenin's death).

Again, it's an old idea, probably old by Paul's day. God gave Paul, his companions, and their hosts in Thessalonica unique talents, abilities, and interests. He did this to provide for them. In other times (re the Israelites in the desert) God overtly, publicly provided food for his people. Yet that was a-typical, an exception to the norm. Most of the rest of people in history have worked for our bread. When we merge our talents with realizing that our work can be a form of worship, we begin to realize that this is how Jesus works actively in our lives to put food in our mouths, clothes on our backs, and health in our bodies.

When you go to work today, remember Jesus is working through it. The next time you visit a store, remind yourself "God gave me this through the paycheck I earned using the abilities He gave to me." When you flip a light switch, remind yourself "God provides a paycheck to me that I earn through the abilities He gave me so that I can pay for electricity." Think of that when you take a shower, when you drive your car, when you do just about anything. You earn your living because you're willing to use the abilities given to you by Him who knows you best.

Paul understood this. So did John Smith and Lenin, though Lenin and his successors then used the tenet to starve and destroy. As guests, a host may provide for us, but in truth they really don't. In God's truth, it is HE who provides for us in all ways, the foremost of them being the abilities He gives us. Or, as Rush might say, "talent on loan from God."

For further reading: 1 Corinthians 9:4-14, 1 Thessalonians 3:4, 2 Thessalonians 3:11.

Lord, You give us talents to provide for us. Thank You for this and help us to use them wisely.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 7 September 2018

We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. 2 Thessalonians 3:11 (NIV).

Some verses are really convicting. I'm convicted deeply by this one. In my opinion, if you read verse 11 and don't see it as a mirror staring back at you, well, you have a problem.

If you're on Facebook (like I am), you're a busybody; you're a gossip. Our world of social media, whether it is Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest or whatever is ALL gossip. That mean's we're all busybodies, busy but not busy about what matters.

I can take it; hit me. "You're Davy Downer." Yep, I guess I am. In that vein, let me hold up that mirror again. Maybe you'll get a deep gaze into it. I know I did. I'm a busybody.

See, I love arguing politics. I'm like others in that I'm pretty sick about America's state of political affairs. I'm like others in that I'm sick of seeing my side denigrated and put-down over what we believe. When someone says something I think is wrong, I like to stand up and defend what I believe. To be fair, folks on the other side sometimes present consideration-worthy, valid arguments; after all, we're all Americans. But do I let it stop there? No, usually I don't. Usually I press on, yammering about whatever point I was trying to make. Have I reinforced some opinions? Probably. Have I changed any minds? Unlikely.

Sometimes I pig-pile on "liking" things that I find funny; sometimes it's at someone else's expense. And, yes, I'm guilty of sharing things that are out & out wrong. Or vengeful. It's no better than being in the hall in high school, chattering by the lockers or passing notes up and down the aisle. Or standing in the back of the church, catching up on who's doing what behind their backs. For me, social media is nothing more than a place to waste valuable time talking about other people or myself.

(In addition to being arrogant, prideful, and, yes, sometimes a jerk) That makes me a gossip. Time for another look in the mirror. If Paul "friended" me, would he think I was a gossip, a busybody? Worse, would Jesus?

Boy that mirror is bright! Here's an internet link, one of thousands, that mentions 32 verses decrying gossiping: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/bible-verses-about-gossip/>. It wasn't just Paul saying it's wrong.

How to change? Stand at the cross: "I'm sorry, please forgive me" and mean it. Then back away from the laptop, the iPhone. When the urge comes to argue, back away and pray a little. It takes time; it takes effort; that mirror is heavy, and I'm a gossip addict. But if I don't try, do I really want to face Jesus one day and have Him look at me disappointed about this? Or worse, have Him rightfully call me a hypocrite?

For further reading: 1 Timothy 5:13, 2 Thessalonians 3:12.

Lord, help me to change!

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Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 10 September 2018

Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. 2 Thessalonians 3:12 (NIV).

Paul is talking here about idle people, about the busybodies he mentioned in the previous verses; we discussed this last time; we get it. Yet there's one more perspective to consider.

Settle down.

Paul is telling the Thessalonian busybodies to settle down. Paul is telling people with idle hearts to just calm down. Paul is telling you and me to take a chill pill and relax. Why?

When we get 'all up in someone's business' we aren't calm, we aren't relaxed, we're unsettled. Paul saw that in his Greek friends and realized it was important to call them out on it. Gossips are busy. Un-centered people aren't calm. It takes effort to learn the latest on what someone is up to.

That must displease Jesus. If anything, Jesus was always calm. Even in the middle of his 'action moments' (like clearing the temple, walking on water, or healing all those people), he was collected and controlled. Jesus didn't rush; Jesus wasn't a busybody; Jesus didn't talk cheap; Jesus didn't get all out of hand. Paul reminds us that we should act the same as Jesus. We should be measured and collected.

That's especially important when it comes to using the talents Christ loans to us to provide for our general welfare. Sure, there are times for fast moves, and there are times when we need to do things quickly yet even then we are to strive to be calm, to settle down and do what we know how to do.

Yesterday I flew from Dallas to Raleigh (to then drive up to Roanoke). In the airport, everyone is busy. Everyone is usually hustling to get from point A to point B, and many folks look stressed. I wonder how Paul's words would play out if someone got on the loudspeaker and said, "everyone just settle down." Stress on the TV, stress on the streets, stress in our homes, stress that won't let you fall asleep at night: even if you aren't a busybody, and even if you are generally a 'chill person,' it's going on all around us 24/7 now. There is a better way, you know.

Next time you come across a busybody, do what you can to help them settle down. The next time you or I become that busybody ourselves, how about we do the same thing? Relax. Cop a squat. Sit down, breathe in, and just take a short time out. Invite Jesus into the situation and just chill out already. We have work to do, so let's do what we can to do it right the first time. That means being calm.

For further reading: Ephesians 4:28, 2 Thessalonians 3:13.

Lord, help me to be calm, to be controlled and measured in all I say and do.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 11 September 2018

And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good. 2 Thessalonians 3:13 (NIV).

I listened to a sermon that my friend, Patrick, gave over the weekend and the dominant theme of it was that the life God has planned for us is much better than the ones we have planned for ourselves. He tells the story of going into an auto dealer with one agenda, talking with a sales agent, and then returning to the store the next day only to have the agent tell him “thanks, you really helped me yesterday.” My friend didn’t even know he’d said or done anything helpful.

Isn’t that always the case? It seems like the perfect reason for this verse, doesn’t it? We don’t know when we might be helping someone (but God does), so we should simply live our lives in Godly ways and not tire of doing those good, Godly things. They matter. People are watching.

Today is 9/11. You know what that means; you know what happened that day. It’s a day for remembering those who died who didn’t deserve to. Firemen and police, Port Authority workers, brokerage house staffers, shift workers in uniform, flight attendants and pilots, innocent airline passengers: all of them senselessly murdered out of true hatred.

And in the 17 years since, it is the good those people did, the good for which they’re remembered, that matters so much more than the hateful terrorist freaks who murdered them. Folks who worked in the Pentagon or the World Trade Center had no idea what would happen that day. Nobody who died on Flight 93 knew what would happen; nobody who survived that day knew what would happen in the days and years to come. But most people DID keep on doing what is good. The people who rushed in to help, the millions who gave blood, the people who worked to build back: they never tired of doing what is good.

They are still not tired.

So much of the air in our public life today is taken up by busybodies. ALL of social media is comprised of busybodies, and we’ve each been those small people. Yet even this pales in comparison to the selfless love of Jesus shown by caring, by working out the fruits of His Spirit such as kindness, patience, goodness and the rest. Those things matter more than all the gossip, or troubles, or hateful beliefs that have nothing to do with peace. They matter even more than losing dear loved ones. With God’s Spirit guiding what we think and do, the life we can have is indeed so much better than the small, petty lives we try to insist for ourselves.

God bless the families, dearly lost, and surviving friends of 9/11.

For further reading: 2 Thessalonians 3:14.

Lord, bless those who died and those who lived to pick up the pieces. Help us all to better live out Your Spirit especially on this day.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 12 September 2018

Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer. 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 (NIV).

A friend of mine is experiencing a spiritual revival. A few days ago I asked her if anything bad had happened and she answered, no, nothing indeed had happened. She was simply being passionate about the Spirit. In the last few weeks, she has shared dozens, maybe hundreds, of Spirit-fed blurbs denouncing religion while supporting all things, all thoughts, all preaching, all love and justice Jesus. Only Jesus. She would agree with Paul's exhortation to treat wayward people with love, confronting and warning when they are 'over the line' but in a spirit of love and not condemnation.

Yet correct we must...sometimes. Nowhere in the Bible does Jesus tell us to be mean when we confront each other. Nowhere in this letter (or any of his letters) does Paul tell his friends to be jerks. Instead, Jesus (and Paul) tell us to confront each other when it's necessary, when peoples' conduct is ungodly and dangerous to the body of Christ (that is the church of believers). Paul, conscious that his words were being Divinely inspired, urged his readers to treat fellow believers, wayward followers, and those who are ignorant of Jesus with love. Warn them as if they are your fellow believer, as if they don't realize they're making mistakes. After all, "they" could be me or you at any time; got skin, got sin.

When we confront each other, our motive **MUST** be love. It must be out of caring for their welfare as followers of Jesus. We must seek to confront each other in the kind of motivation that Jesus did, that Paul would.

I once belonged to a church where the pastor was a tyrant. As a member of the church council, I got to see him up close. Like good pastors, he asked for, sometimes even demanded, unity in the Spirit. That we, as the governing body, lead in consensus and be unified in supporting decisions we made. What he rarely said was that he meant we should carry out decisions HE made. He didn't like being confronted about this. In fact, he became belligerent; he got downright angry when we started to ignore him.

When I think about confronting others, I try to ask myself how someone should or would confront me. If I'm caught in a sin, if I've done something wrong, if I'm doing something bad or hurtful, how would I want someone to correct me? In those moments, I go back to my friend's revival and remember that I'd want to hear things in love. That's the only answer.

For further reading: Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 4:14, Galatians 6:1, Philemon 16, 2 Thessalonians 3:16.

Lord Jesus, help me to confront others in Your love.

Practical Proverbial, from 2 Thessalonians, 14 September 2018

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. 2 Thessalonians 3:16-18 (NIV).

Another ending. Like 1 Thessalonians (and his other books), Paul ends with a doxology and invocation of blessings on his friends.

Focus on the peace. That's the message Paul intended for you. It's what he was looking for you to gather from this letter. Peace from the Lord Himself. Peace at all times; peace in everything with you. Not just you: all of you. All of us. All the time in all ways possible. THAT is the message of Christianity. More than Christianity, THAT is the message of Jesus Christ because Jesus is peace.

Jesus' peace matters above everything else in the closing comments because Jesus matters more than anything else, period. Jesus' peace allows us to stay calm when things around us are in chaos. Jesus' peace lets us back away from arguments (like the ones I usually have) where we simply must be right! Jesus' peace heals all wounds of the heart. Paul understood this. He understood the brutal world of malice and conquest in which he lived. He understood that it would eventually kill him (which it did) but could consume him and anyone else long before unless they could fight it with something stronger.

Jesus' peace was stronger. It still is.

As you go into your weekend, remember that there are people today who are hurting. There are hurricane evacuees worried about losing their homes. There are people whose loved ones are dying, or have just died. There are people out of work, deep in debt, plagued by past decisions, living in abuse. Name your pet sin and someone is being tortured by it. Those people need peace. Those people need Jesus' peace. Those people are actually you and me.

We can share Jesus' peace by submitting to Him, then living out our lives in the ways He did: kindness, faithfulness to Him and to each other, patience, forbearance, understanding, and empathy. You and I GET to put Paul's benediction into practice by sharing the peace of Jesus Christ with other people by the things we say and do. You and I get to focus on the peace of Jesus and let Him work His work through us by doing the things He would have us do. In doing that, we both experience and share God's grace the way He intended it: peace for everyone.

For further reading: 1 Timothy 1:1

Lord, thank You for Paul's epistles, for the words You shared through him. Grant us Your beautiful peace to everyone, everywhere.