

October 31, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return *But the Lord is Faithful*

2 Thessalonians 3:1 – 5

Last week we looked at the imperative of prayer for the triumph of the gospel in the world, and understood that God will cause His gospel to triumph, but He will not do that apart from the prayers of the saints. Our prayers for His triumph are crucial. The purpose of God in creation and redemption hinges on the success of His word in the world, because Jesus told His disciples that the gospel must be preached to all peoples and then the end will come; and in the end we see multitudes around the throne from every tribe and nation and people and tongue, glorifying God. Therefore the gospel must speed ahead to those people if the purpose of God is to be accomplished; and our prayers are crucial to the outcome. In fact, I believe that the primary purpose of prayer is for the spread of the gospel. Paul invites the saints in Thessalonica to join with him in the great global cause of the gospel by praying that the word of God would speed ahead and be glorified.

I want to remind you again of four truths we are building our lives around here at Summit: We were created to glorify God by enjoying Him forever. We have been commissioned by Christ to spend our lives making others eternally glad in God. We are called by Jesus to cultivate a lifestyle that reflects our everlasting enjoyment in God by risking temporal loss for eternal gain. We must set ourselves as a church toward the goal of reaching the nations with the gospel.

And to that end we pray. In John 15:16 we see that prayer is for bearing fruit and that God has given us prayer because Christ has given us a mission. That mission to bear fruit *requires* our prayers to God to fulfill His word and cause His gospel to triumph in the world and His kingdom to come. So Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to pray – pray for the gospel to run and spread, and pray that wicked and evil men would not get in the way of the spread of the gospel – for not all have faith.

And then Paul adds: *But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.* 2 Thessalonians 3:3 *But the Lord is faithful* only makes sense if we understand that the prayer to be delivered from wicked and evil men does not mean that we won't suffer at the hands of those who hate God and hate the message of the gospel. In fact as we learned in 1 Thessalonians, we have been destined to suffer for the sake of Christ and the triumph of the gospel in the world. And the plan of God is that His goal is accomplished by our prayers for that to happen and through the suffering of His people. Our living to make much of God in the earth is often accomplished through our dying for the sake of the gospel.

Consider how Jesus sends us into the world. *'Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.'* Matthew 10:16a Think about it, what chance does a sheep have in the middle of a pack of wolves? You don't send a sheep out into the middle of a pack of wolves to have a good time. And we might ask, 'Why would Jesus send His people out like lambs among wolves?' That doesn't seem like a very smart way to build a ministry – the lambs keep getting slaughtered. But we should not build our theology on what we think is smart or logical or the best way to do things. Jesus commissioned and sent His disciples out with these words in John 21: *as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.* John 21:21 And the Father sent His Son, the Lamb of God, to be slaughtered so *that* the gospel would run and speed ahead so *that* wicked, sinful people would be saved so *that* His glory would fill the earth.

The gospel conquers by dying. When Joseph Ton was a pastor in Romania he was arrested by the secret police for publishing a sermon calling for the churches to refuse to submit to the Communist government's demand for control over their ministries. When an official told him he must renounce his sermon, he replied, *"No, sir! I won't do that!"* The official, surprised that anyone would respond so forcefully to the secret police, said, *"Aren't you aware that I have the power of life and death over you?"* "Sir, let me explain that to you," Tson said. *"You see, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. . . . You know that my sermons are spread all over the country on tapes. When you kill me, I only sprinkle them with my blood. They will speak 10 times louder after that, because everybody will say, 'That preacher meant it because he sealed it with his blood.'* So go on, sir, kill me. When you kill me, I win the supreme victory."

This is what Jesus promises all who follow Him: *"But you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, and you will be hated by all because of My name. Yet not a hair of your head will perish.* Luke 21:16-18 And again in Matthew He says: *"But beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues ; 18 and you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a witness [marturion] to them and to the Gentiles..."Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child ; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.* Matthew 10:17-21

Paul confirms the reality of this in his letter to the Romans: *As it is written, "For Your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."* Romans 8:36 Paul acknowledges that this side of heaven is full of unpleasant things for those who follow Christ – he lists some of them in verse 35 of this chapter – tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, swords, but he also confirms the reality of the ultimate triumph of Christ: *For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 8:38-39

The point I am somewhat laboriously making is that when we read passages like this: *But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one* – we should not suppose that means nothing bad will ever happen to us. We should in fact know that if we set ourselves for the triumph of the gospel in the world that we will be like lambs in the midst of wolves and as Matthew says, hated by all because of His name.

But if you noticed, Jesus tells His disciples in Luke that, *'Not a hair of your head will perish.'* I am sure when Jesus told them that at least some of them had instant thoughts of His cousin John who lost not only his hair but his whole head for the sake of righteousness. But I think that phrase works exactly like this one in 2 Thessalonians – *But the Lord is faithful. He will establish and guard you against the evil one.* How are we to understand that we will be betrayed by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of us will be put to death – yet not a hair of our head will perish? How should lambs set down in the middle of a pack of ravenous wolves understand that the Lord is faithful and He will establish them and guard them against the evil one?

First of all we need to understand that The Lord is faithful. He is irrevocably committed and faithful to the triumph of His purpose in the world. The fact that He is faithful does not speak to our comfort, our ease, our being free of trouble and toil in this life. The fact that He is faithful speaks to His total commitment to His own purpose in the universe. And in His purpose and plan, He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world – in time He called us out of darkness and into the light – and blessed us and commissioned us to go into all the world to preach the good news of Jesus Christ – so that His way may be known on earth, His saving power among all nations, and His glory would fill the earth. *He is faithful to bring that to pass.* We can count on Him to do that – in spite of, and indeed helped along by, tribulation and distress and persecution and famine and nakedness and danger and swords. But the Lord is faithful.

What that means in the middle of our distresses and troubles and afflictions and sicknesses is that we can trust Him *that what looks like disaster is success – what looks like defeat is victory – what looks like tragedy is really triumph.* We can be sure that His calling is not in vain as we read in 1 Thessalonians: *He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.* 1 Thessalonians 5:23 – 24 He will sanctify us spirit, soul and body and when He comes again *nothing* is lost. We can be sure that our confession of the hope of glory is not in vain because *He who promised is faithful.* Hebrews 10:23 We can be certain that on the far side of every risk we take for the cause of Christ, even if we die, we will never be separated from *the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 8:39

We also need to understand that The Lord will establish you. The Lord is faithful and He will establish us. The word translated establish is *sterizo*, which means to make stable, to place firmly, to strengthen, make firm, to render constant. I take that to mean that in spite of everything that comes at us to dislodge us from the faith, to destabilize our foundation, to terrify us and cause us to lose hope – the Lord will strengthen us in that very thing so that His purpose for us will be fulfilled and our lives will resound to His glory. Because He is faithful to seeing His glory and gospel triumph in the world, He will make us constant and firm in the fight. *"But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit"* Jer. 17:7-8.

Andrew Murray taught that when we find ourselves in the valley of trouble we can depend and trust in four things: He brought me here. It is by His will I am in this strait place and in that fact I will rest. He will keep me here in His love and give me grace to behave as His child. He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me the lessons He intends for me to learn and in His good time He can bring me out again—how and when He knows. And I would add that since God intends that His gospel triumph, even death itself is a servant of His glory.

And then we need to understand that He will guard us against the evil one. The Lord is faithful and He will guard you against the evil one. The word translated guard is *phulasso*, which means to guard, protect, defend, preserve, to keep from being lost or perishing. What guard does not mean here is that those who belong to Christ will never experience anything bad at the hands of the evil one. What it means is that in all the evil, in all the trouble, it is the Lord who guards our hearts and our minds from losing the hope of our salvation and He will keep us from being lost. As Paul told the Corinthians: it is *'...our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.'* 1 Corinthians 1:8 That means that ultimately, though the evil one has been given a leash to do evil in the world, particularly against the people of God, that leash is short and is of God's own making, and God controls the outcome and not Satan. The fact that the purpose of God is invincible – it cannot fail – means that to those whom He calls, He will also provide every means of success in the venture, with the assurance of heaven in the end.

So when Paul says, *But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one* and Jesus says, *"But you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, and you will be hated by all because of My name. "Yet not a hair of your head will perish –* they are saying the cause of Christ and the glory of God will triumph in the world and those who are His will not be lost and will share in that triumph. On this side of heaven it may look like tragedy – but on that side all we will see is triumph.

Eighteen-year-old Soo Kan spent 11 years in China after she and her family escaped from communist North Korea. Like many defectors who have made that trek, they took refuge for a time in a South Korean consulate until they were successfully granted asylum in South Korea. Soo Kan also lived during that time with a Chinese family, who she says "adopted" her. "They showed the love of God to me," said Soo Kan, eventually leading her to become a Christian. Soo Kan told her story in broken English before an audience of over 4,000 on the second evening of the once-a-decade Lausanne conference. Her father worked for Kim Jong Il, she said, until he fell out of favor with the North Korean leader, who recently named his younger son Kim Jong Un as his successor. That forced the family's flight from their home and a prolonged pilgrimage to the south. Over that time, Soo Kan's parents became Christians, she said, and her father, once imprisoned by the regime, eventually decided to return to North Korea: "He wanted to share the love of God he had received with his countrymen." But discovered by the North Korean regime, he landed in prison again in 2006—and disappeared. "I have heard no word about my father, and in all probability he has been shot to death," she told the audience. Now studying in South Korea, Soo Kan said she hopes to attend a university and prepare herself to return to the north, where, like her father, she wants to spend her life for the cause of Christ in North Korea.

Let me close with this portrait of a man who knew and embraced these truths as few rarely have: Adoniram Judson, who served the cause of Christ in Burma, now known as Myanmar. When he entered Burma in 1813 it was a hostile and utterly unreached place. William Carey had told Judson in India a few months earlier not to go there. It probably would have been considered a closed country today - with a capricious and despotic ruler, constant war with their neighboring country, Siam, enemy raids, constant rebellion, no religious toleration. All the previous missionaries had died or left. But Judson went there with his 23-year-old wife of 17 months named Ann. He was 24 years old and he worked there for 38 years until his death at age 61, with one trip home to New England after 33 years.

Ann and Judson had three children and all of them died. The first baby, nameless, was born dead just as they sailed from India to Burma. The second child, Roger Williams Judson, lived 17 months and died. The third, Maria Elizabeth Butterworth Judson, lived to be two, and outlived her mother by six months and then died. At one point Judson wrote, *"If I had not felt certain that every additional trial was ordered by infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my accumulated sufferings."* Work in Burma was a life-long battle in the 108-degree heat with cholera, malaria, dysentery, and other miseries that would take two of Judson's wives and seven of his 13 children, and colleague after colleague in death. Through all the struggles with sickness and interruptions Judson labored to learn the language, translate the Bible, and do evangelism on the streets. Six years after they arrived, they baptized their first convert, Maung Nau.

In 1823 Adoniram and Ann moved from Rangoon to Ava, the capital, about 300 miles inland and further up the Irrawaddy River. In May of the next year the British fleet arrived in Rangoon and bombarded the harbor. All westerners were immediately viewed as spies, and Adoniram was dragged from his home and on June 8, 1824 and put in prison, along with other westerners. Their feet were fettered and at night a long horizontal bamboo pole was lowered and passed between their legs and hoisted up till only the shoulder and heads of the prisoners rested on the ground. Ann was pregnant, but walked the two miles daily to the palace to plead that Judson was not a spy and that they should have mercy. Twelve agonizing months later, Judson and Price, along with a small group of surviving Western prisoners, were marched overland, barefoot and sick, for six more months of misery in a primitive village near Mandalay.

On November 4, 1825 Judson was suddenly released. The government needed him as a translator in negotiations with Britain. The long ordeal was over - 17 months in prison and on the brink of death, with his wife sacrificing herself and her baby to care for him as she could. Ann's health was broken. Eleven months later she died (October 24, 1826). And six months later their daughter died (April 24, 1827). While he was suffering in prison Adoniram had said to a fellow prisoner, *"It is possible my life will be spared; if so, with what ardor shall I pursue my work! If not - his will be done. The door will be opened for others who would do the work better."* All Judson had in view was the triumph of the gospel on the earth. Every blessing he received, every suffering he endured served only to further the cause of Christ and that is what he risked so much for.

He was no stranger to loneliness, depression and deep spiritual valleys. He wrote in one letter home to Ann's relatives: *"My tears flow at the same time over the forsaken grave of my dear love and over the loathsome sepulcher of my own heart."* He had a grave dug beside the hut and sat beside it contemplating the stages of the body's dissolution. He retreated for forty days alone into the tiger-infested jungle, and wrote in one letter than he felt utter spiritual desolation. *"God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in him, but I find him not."*

But Judson's faith was not based on what he felt or saw or experience of suffering and loss – he believed in a God that was faithful and promised to establish and guard him against all the devil could throw his way. And all through the year 1830 Adoniram was climbing out of his darkness, and in 1831 God opened the windows of heaven as it were and poured out on Burma a great blessing.

Judson wrote: *'The spirit of inquiry . . . is spreading everywhere, through the whole length and breadth of the land.'* [We have distributed] *nearly 10,000 tracts, giving to none but those who ask. I presume there have been 6000 applications at the house. Some come two or three months' journey, from the borders of Siam and China - 'Sir, we hear that there is an eternal hell. We are afraid of it. Do give us a writing that will tell us how to escape it.' Others, from the frontiers of Kathay, 100 miles north of Ava - 'Sir, we have seen a writing that tells about an eternal God. Are you the man that gives away such writings? If so, pray give us one, for we want to know the truth before we die.'* Others, from the interior of the country, where the name of Jesus Christ is a little known - *'Are you Jesus Christ's man? Give us a writing that tells us about Jesus Christ.'*

When Judson began his mission in Burma, he set a goal of translating the Bible and founding a church of 100 members before his death. When he died, he left the first Burmese Bible, the first ever Burmese-English, dictionary, 100 churches, and over 8,000 believers. There are three things we need to take away from this: (1) Every follower of Jesus Christ has been saved by God to make the glory of God known in all the earth. (2) God will make His glory known on the earth, and (3) God will establish us and guard us against anything that threatens the fulfillment of that purpose. So we should be the most radical, risk-taking people on the face of the earth for the sake of the gospel and the glory of Christ's name.

Our great God and gracious Savior,

We thank You that You are faithful and will establish us and guard us from the evil one. Don't let us be surprised by suffering. Don't let us be dismayed by being cut off early from this life. Don't let us be shaken at the betrayal of family or friends and the blast of enmity by evil men. Help us embrace the path you carved out for us and count it all joy and to say with Paul 'to live is Christ and to die is gain'. Grant us to know that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Build into the fiber of our faith a rugged, resilient, perseverance in the face of evil for the global cause of the gospel and the triumph of Christ in the world. Awaken compassion for all who are lost and make us the most radical, risk-taking people for the sake of the gospel and the glory of Your name we pray in the conquering name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.