

We're going to be in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 today. "But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word." Gratitude itself is a profound theme that is woven into both letters that Paul sent to the church in Thessalonica. It is really the thread that drives both letters together. They're going to overlap each other, because Paul goes on his second missionary journey to Thessalonica. And even though he's there for a short amount of time, he sees a lot of fruit when he goes to the synagogues and proclaims the gospel as is customary for Paul to do. The text is going to tell us that leading women, religious and pagan converts come out of Paul's interaction with the people in Thessalonica. They hear the gospel and believe, so much so that they get run out of town by a mob of Jews who say, "These are the men who are turning the world upside down." If anyone is saying that about you, then you're probably doing a good job ministering where you are. But that's what Paul was known for in Thessalonica. He's turning the world upside down, therefore he is a marked man. He got run out of there. And Paul knows it wouldn't be wise for him to go back. So Paul, being shrewd, covertly sends Timothy to go check on those in Thessalonica. Timothy comes back and says, "They're doing well." And then Paul fires off 1 Thessalonians. Some themes there is Paul says, "You guys are an example to all believers. People are hearing of you in regions beyond just where you live." And then he tells them, "You saw us suffer well, and we told you that you were going to have to suffer." And then Timothy reiterates to Paul in his letter, "Here's where they need reassurance. They need reassurance in their continued persecution. Speak to those." And so Paul does. People are dying because of persecution, but people are also dying because of old age and natural causes. And they're curious about how to deal with death in light of the gospel. And then they're so intrigued with Jesus' return. There is a smattering of answers to questions in both 1 and 2 Thessalonians about Jesus' return. They're lighting Paul up with questions. "So what's it going to look like? When is He coming back? What are the last days going to look like? How do I prepare myself? What does that mean for me now? Is my dead friend going to raise with me? Is my resurrection going to be different from his resurrection? Does he get to go too?" They are blowing Paul up with all kinds of questions about the second coming. And Paul speaks to these things and more. A short time after writing 1 Thessalonians, Paul hears a few more things about the church, so he sends the second letter as well. He says that he wanted to encourage them, that their faith is growing and their love is increasing and that he also understands that their suffering has gotten worse and that God would use their suffering to make them worthy. And he answers yet again more questions about the return of Christ.

So you have this young church known to be suffering well, encouraging others in the region full of converts, pagan religious, leading women of the city asking home run, spot on, theological questions in the middle of their hardships and preeminently concerned with the return of Christ. These are the Thessalonians. We have a lot to learn from them. And my prayer for us has been that, especially in light of our situation here, the Lord would teach us through this text. So as we pick up in verse 13, Paul writes, ". . .because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice the reference to all three Persons of the Godhead. Notice the trinitarian reference, that Paul is abundantly grateful to God that God the Father had chosen them in the awakening power of the Spirit by the proclamation and their reception of the gospel, that is the descension, the life, the suffering, the death, the resurrection

and the return of Jesus Christ, who is now theirs in whom they are hidden. Paul told the Galatian church, "We publicly put Christ on display as crucified, and you heard with faith. He is a Redeemer and Restorer of life. You did, by conviction, believe yourself to be morally bankrupt, you did believe your heart to be depraved and you did see that Jesus Christ is for you all that God would ever demand of you. He willingly laid down His life for your sake to be caught up in the same glory that He is caught up in to the praise of the Father. We proclaimed that message to you and you believed, you heard with faith and you're His now. And the Spirit that applied that truth is now making you holy to share in the glory of Christ." Paul is grateful that they heard the gospel and believed, because he sees the Father. Here's the trinitarian work – the Father electing, the Son loving and the Spirit making holy.

This might be new language for the Thessalonian church. The language of the Trinity might have been new to them, especially if they were pagans and had no historical Hebrew understanding. It may be new or newer language for you, the idea of God working in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But the thing that I have to stress is this is not God bursting on the scene. This is not His introduction. This is not the introduction of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit into the world. Because the eternal God has always been at work. The Father, Son and Spirit are doing something in the Thessalonian church that is a continuation of the steady, eternal plan of God. Even in creation, even in the very beginning story of the Bible we see the Father originating, speaking creation into being through His Word – His Son, as the Spirit moves over the face of the waters, giving life and shape to all of His creation, creating a perfect world that echoes the brilliance of the Godhead. John 16 and 17 really hone in on this truth, that even before time, the Father has been glorifying the Son, the Son glorifies the Father and the Spirit glorifies the Son. C.S. Lewis called this "the dance of God," that God is in this perpetual movement around Himself. He's not a static God; He's self-giving God. He glorifies the other Persons in the Trinity. And out of this movement of God, comes a world that is to be an echo of His trinitarian brilliance. And that's the world that He created. The Son, the Father and the Spirit have praise, joy and delight within the Godhead. They are eternally happy within themselves. So the world's creation is a trinitarian doing, and the peace and prosperity of God is the shalom that He puts in there. But the peace and prosperity of God implodes in the sinfulness of man and sin snowballs. This is a story that we teach a lot, and I hope it's a story that you know well. Sin snowballs and no man is exempt from its devastation. In the wake of our idolatry, a world of anguish, suffering, affliction and strife remains. So Paul's gratitude is that the same God that elected the world into existence had now elected this little group of believers to be a people for Himself, because their hope was in the Lord. So what God created, what man had stained, He recreated through Jesus Christ in the salvation of this church. And what God created in the world and what we, like all men, marred His peace and prosperity by putting ourselves before Him, He has recreated. His creation of the world and our recreation are a trinitarian doing. The God of all time has saved the day in His Son, and we are now recipients of the honor, praise and fame that belongs to the Son. And we will have the fullness of that when He returns. My hope is that this would cause wonder in your hearts. When we look at the Thessalonian church in their affliction, they didn't just stumble into some high-octane coping strategy with how to deal with their sufferings. They didn't just stumble into how to deal with the fact that things are hard, but rather the God of all time, who doesn't scratch His head at anything, had lifted them from the grave when He saved them into a plan that He had been formulating since the beginning of time. We are chosen to be His. We are His from all time. He is a God who knows exactly what He's doing and exactly where He's going. We are His.

I do not want to lose sight of the context of the Thessalonian church. We cannot lose the context of suffering. Remember, this is a small church. This is a small group of converts. This is a church that is suffering well but is still looking for answers. They're wanting to know when and how it's all going to end and counting the cost of Jesus. And they're needing encouragement in this. I think that this particularly speaks to us in Dallas, because ten days ago when I heard about Bill Seal, it punched me in the gut. Bill is a heck of a boss, he's a heck of a mentor and he's a better friend. He's like two parts wisdom, one part goofball. He is a sage. He has immediate credibility when he speaks into an issue in your life. He has that confident gift from the Lord, but he also loves to joke and make light of things. So this punched me in the gut. It was hard, especially on the heels of the miracle that is Matt's continued healing and the heartache that

was brought out from that. It was a hard day for me. It has been a hard ten days for me. And we're in the back end of a recession. I know that it's not technically a recession anymore, but that's not so much a soothing word to people who can't pay their bills. I just want to let you guys know that there are covenant members in our midst who can't pay their bills. And I'm not talking about the internet package on their iPhone. I'm talking about how they are struggling month to month to pay their rent and to pay their utilities. I think Sarah hit the nail on the head with the generational erosion of marriage by talking about abuse, adultery and divorce that my generation specifically sees the fallout and byproduct of the nastiness of what marriage has become in the United States. So you have people who are leaving each other in marriage just because they don't feel it anymore, and you have kids who are coming out of that not knowing what it's like to be loved by a father or nurtured by a mother. Think about the implications that has on how they go about their business. Praise be to the Lord for the gospel, but there is still a fallout. There is still a lot of suffering from the erosion of marriage, and we see it, especially in our young urban professionals. It has just been a particular season of sadness here at the Village. It has been a hard season of affliction, of hardship, of difficulty. Being the care and recovery minister here, I get a window into it that most of you guys don't. It's my job to see and meet these people and comfort them. But I do have a hunch that I don't even see the half of it. I have a hunch that I'm not inclined to see most of our hardships, our afflictions, our sufferings. It's partly because I don't know everyone and partly because a lot of it is hidden somewhere in your hearts.

I do want to say that the Thessalonian church is a persecuted church. The degree of their persecution far outweighs anything that we see here, and that's fair. The level of persecution that they experience is going to be more in line with a North Korea, a Burma, a Laos or a China. There is exponentially more persecution there than we experience here. And I say this without any hint of cliché or triteness when I say that I praise the Lord for His common grace here among us in Dallas, Texas and in the United States of America. Praise the Lord that we can pray, gather, evangelize, worship and do not fear governmental reproach. That is a gift of the Lord, and I pray that you treasure it. In the middle of a down economy, in a country with really bad debt, most of us will have food, will have shelter and will have provisions tonight, even in our hardship. I praise the Lord for that, but we can't go too far the other way either. We can't let the pendulum swing too far in the other direction, because to say it is certainly worse in other places doesn't mean we can't say it's tough here as well. Because if creation is subjected to futility, then all things are just a shadow of what they were. And everything is in need of redemption. Atrophy has come to all things. Everything is withering away to a form and shadow of what it once was and what the Lord will make it one day. And death is the surest sign of a universal suffering. It is the common denominator. So because I say a particular season of hardship has come to this body, then a season of hardship has come to us all. Why is that? Because we rejoice with those who rejoice, and we weep with those who weep. We are one body.

So let's see how Paul answers this. What is his word? Verse 15, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter." The trinitarian reminder is the greatest thing that Paul can tell this church. He's saying, "Remember what we taught you. Remember that the God who creates is the God who saves. Remember we told you that everyone who follows Christ will suffer and that God's will for your life is your sanctification, to love Christ more in the middle of your suffering." If we polled our pastoral staff, the number one question that we get from you guys is, "I'm just trying to discern what the Lord's will is for my life." It's a great question. It's a wonderful question. It's a question you need answers to. And a lot of times, we can try to clarify some things, we can pray for clarity and we can show you how to walk through certain decisions and how to weigh those things, but at the end of the day we can't make those decisions for you. What we can tell you, what Paul told this church is that the will of God for your life this morning, tonight, tomorrow morning is your sanctification. If you don't know where you're going, let me tell you where you should be going – smack dab in the face of Jesus Christ to be conformed unto His image. That's His will for you today. Do that and watch Him move in the circumstances, in the details. That's what he's telling

this church. He's telling that He's coming back for you and you're not destined for wrath. You build one another up, you admonish the idle, you encourage the fainthearted, help the weak and be patient with them all.

And then he's going to drive it home with two imperatives, two commands. He's going to say, "Stand firm." This is a rich word, and it means to be fully committed in conviction and belief. He's saying, "Don't waver. This is the Lord's doing in your life. Don't waver. You're His. It has been accomplished. It is true. He has brought you into Himself. Don't waver from that." And then to bolster his argument, he doesn't just say stand firm, he commands them to be strong, which is also another rich word in meaning. It means to adhere strongly to the convictions, namely the implications of the truth that you believe. He says, "As you've been saved by the truth of the gospel, may your actions evidence a commitment to who you know yourself to be." Paul is going to bring it home to the practical. He always does. He says, "This is who God is, and this is what it means." He's praying for the suffering church, and here's his prayer. "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace. . ." "Eternal comfort and good hope through grace" are a past-tense gift given to us by the Lord. They are something given to us in the past. It had to be a soothing balm to this church for Paul to tell them that they had eternal comfort. Both of these gifts are present resources with future implications. Eternal comfort means a lasting encouragement that Christ Himself has given you through grace because it's a free gift. The prophet Zephaniah says, "The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing." This is a song that is in replay over your lives. Your believing in the great trade of the gospel of Christ in you means that every praise that has ever been directed towards the Son is counted as yours. So by merit of His life, by your faith and by His covering, His righteous life being reckoned as yours, when the Father tells the Son, "This is My Son, in whom I am well pleased;" He's telling you and those who are in Christ right now, "This is My son, this my daughter, in whom I am well pleased." And it is an eternal comfort because nothing can take it away from you. It's a song that should replay in your mind over and over until you see Him face to face. And it's a song that replays in your mind even when you're a knucklehead. We might as well face it. A lot of us in this room are knuckleheads. Some are in some more knuckleheaded endeavors than others right now. If you are in Christ, then you are both the delight and joy of the Father and a knucklehead at the same time. Both of those things are true. That this song continually rings in your ears has just rich, lasting implications on why you shouldn't be a knucklehead. You have to hear "eternal comfort from the Lord."

But moreover, you have to hear that the Lord has given you "good hope through grace." All He has promised you will come true. Every last word of what the Lord has promised will come true. He is again affirming to this suffering church that Christ is coming back. He's saying, "He has something wonderful for you, something worth waiting for." And as we look into the suffering of the Thessalonian church, I want you to notice how the first part of Paul's prayer is centered on the reality of the Thessalonian hardship yet there is not a defeatist tone. There's rather the opposite. Paul is resourcing them by showing that the current and future blessing of being a child of God involves an eternal comfort and a good hope, a hope you can take to the bank. Because he's not giving them escapist wisdom. He's not giving them a drink. He's not giving them an elixir. He's saying, "These are always yours. They permeate with you now by the Spirit, and they're yours into the future." So this isn't escapist wisdom. He's saying, "Your current affliction is your lot. That's the way it is. And here's how we endure." And don't think that Paul's not praying for easier circumstances for them either. Nowhere in this language does it preclude that Paul is praying for a miracle. Paul very well could have been praying for the miracle over this church that they would not be persecuted to the degree they are. He may be praying that their suffering would lessen. This language doesn't preclude them from asking for a miracle, and it doesn't preclude you from asking for one either. Because the very purpose of a miracle is to show the surpassing power of God now as a preview for what His kingdom will be, with no sin or suffering. But Paul knows, as his life models, that the Lord is often inclined to use afflictions, and he's praying that the Thessalonians would be on point if heightened suffering continues to be their lot.

So my question for you is this. Do you rest in the eternal comfort and the good hope in grace during your hardships? Because some of you do. I can look across this room and I can see some people who I know really well whose lives are an encouragement to me in the way you deal with your hardships, you struggles and your afflictions. You encourage my soul and you encourage this body in how you wrestle with them well. But my heart hurts and I'm burdened by the fact that many others of you have less of a handle on Christian suffering, if any handle at all. The Thessalonian church was learning and evidencing that light and momentary afflictions are preparing an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison. They're learning and showing that suffering constituted their worthiness. I'm really grateful for John Piper for helping me see even more that when Paul is saying to the Colossian church, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ' afflictions for the sake of His body;" that means absolutely nothing about the insufficiency of Christ's sufferings or His death for us and it meant everything about showing the infinite value of Christ's afflictions to people in the world to whom they were still a mystery. As ministers of the Word, we get to carry out the perpetual hope of the mystery of Christ to those whom it is still a mystery. And the hardships of Christ get to be presented to the world through the hardships of His people. The suffering love of Christ for sinners is evidenced by the suffering love of people for sinners. And the Lord uses personal hardships to put our hope fully on God and less in the things that don't satisfy. To know Christ, which is the very aim of our existence regardless of whatever season we find ourselves in, is often facilitated through enduring the sufferings that He went through. And as David Pawson says, hardship, suffering and affliction wean us from sin and strengthen our faith. And our hope in God means that He always has good reason, many times beyond our ability to comprehend, to permit difficulties so that we might treasure Him and make known the unsearchable riches of Christ to those around us. So if you are a skeptic in this room, I have to tell you that just because you don't think there is a good reason that you or someone you know suffers doesn't mean there's not a good reason. Because you cannot take the finiteness of your understanding to the bank in view of an eternal, all-knowing, all-wise God. Suffering is the God intended means to help us count everything as a loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. And it doesn't mean you can't struggle, and it doesn't mean you can't ask the Lord the hard questions as to why these difficulties are there. Just look at Job. You can do that, and in fact you'll have to. You will have to dialogue. But my fear is that some of us get so perpetually side tracked in our hardship because we just see it as getting in the way of all that we think we're to accomplish while we're on earth.

Why is that? Why does that bring us here? Is it because the idea of heaven sure beats the idea of hell? Is that the primary reason? Is that why we're here, because the hope that we would one day spend eternity with the Lord after we do everything we've always wanted to do on earth sure beats the idea of the antithesis of heaven? So many of us sit so unsettled in the life we have, and we're embittered for the one we don't have. And we're frustrated with the Lord because of our lot, so we miss Christ, which is the goal of all of it, to look Him in the face and know Him more. I hope that truth resonates in you. So some of you guys don't ask the Lord the difficult questions about why your lot is the way it is, and you just settle for thinking that He's mad at you. Or maybe even worse, you've become so apathetic to waste tons of time just not wanting to deal with these questions. The problem with that is, for those of you who are in Christ, your suffering cannot be a condemning thing. Because there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. It has to serve as a greater purpose. Satan's design in your suffering is that you would not cherish Christ but that you would rather dabble around in lesser questions about self-importance and fairness. The enemy's M.O. in suffering is always going to be to take away your love for Christ and place it back on yourself. So one of the biggest takeaways I have from studying these two letters to the Thessalonian church is not simply the barrage of questions that they have about the return of Christ. But it's that they were so mesmerized by Christ, Christ's love for them and His return that they just wanted to get things right. They wanted a proper understanding of how it was all going to work. Because they knew that God has purposed their everyday hardship to make them long for the day that the King came back and made all things new. And they knew that the Lord was using them presently to make much of His Son.

So my question is this. Are you seeing your struggles in light of how the Lord purposes hardship? Let's look at verse 17. Paul continues in his prayer. "[May God] comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word." Paul's saying, "Wherever you find yourself, may He guide and instill comfort in your heart." "Heart" is such an easy word to look over. It's such a throwaway word in our language. Because like many other words, it can mean anything that we want it to. It can be profound, or it can be very trivial. But "heart" in the Greek is something very profound. It is the seat of the physical, spiritual and mental life, from which all the emotions, all the wishes, all the desires and all the thoughts flow. It is the center of their being, and Paul is saying, "At your deepest level, let God comfort you now. And the things that you don't want to talk about, let the Lord comfort you now. In your afflictions and hardships, let the Lord comfort you now." He uses another strong word, the word "establish." Establish means to cause your heart to be inwardly firm. It's a causative word, that God is doing. "And may He cause your heart to be inwardly firm in every good work and word."

In 2 Thessalonians 3:5, Paul continues the prayer. He says, "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ." I believe the point he is really driving home here and what I want to make clear to you is this. It is not the absence of affliction that frees you up to live the life that God has called for you. But rather, in the very presence of hardships, we are beckoned to find comfort in the heart of God and press forward, a comfort so strong that it can set us inwardly firm to all the Lord has called us to do. And we remember the life of Christ, whose heart was perfectly established in every good work and word. Because we know of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, we know that He did press on in His sufferings to the good work of the Father. If you've ever been up in the Empire State Building in New York City, it affords you a really compelling view of the city. You can see Lower Manhattan, Upper Manhattan, Staten Island, Brooklyn, Jersey, the East River, the Hudson River and the Statue of Liberty. It's a neat 360° panoramic view. In the beginning of Christ's passion week, during His last trip into Jerusalem, He stands on the Mount of Olives and He gets the most panoramic view of the city that is about to crucify Him. And He steps down into the little hill of the valley and then up into the city of Jerusalem, and He presses on in His affliction unto the cross itself. For the joys set before Him, He endured these things. He endured the cross for the glory of His Father and the purchasing of many sons and daughters. And that suffering itself was just a means for Him to have joy in God. So was we live and long for that same joy, we will once again see the trinitarian God at work on the other side, the God who spoke the world into being, the God who elected us and called us Himself. Revelation tells us that the Spirit is going to usher us in to what the Father has laid out. Making much of the Son, in the middle is going to be the Lamb in radiant glory, the suffering servant. It's going to be the only light that we need. We're going to see our God face to face. We'll see Him and we'll know Him as He is. We'll see the sufferings of the Lamb and all that was accomplished through them. Moreover, we will see how the Lord used suffering in our own lives to bring about the kingdom of God. So in view of the trinitarian God who created the world, who recreated you and is bringing us home, I pray that you would see your suffering in light of all that He's doing.

Let's pray. "Father, thank You for the mission of God in Christ. Thank You for His love and His pursuit. I thank You for the hope that we have in Him, that He has not left us to ourselves, but that in Him we are good because He is good. So I pray that the Spirit who does make much of the Son would do so now. I pray that You would fall on us and reign in our hearts. I pray that we would worship You and that You would bring about the business of the kingdom here this morning. For those who are hurting, for those who are afflicted, for those who are enduring hardship, Lord, strengthen their hands for the days to come. Lord, we love You, we trust You and we need You. We pray all these things in Jesus' good name. Amen."