

A graphic featuring the words "STEADFAST" in a white, sans-serif font, centered within a white double-lined circle. The circle is surrounded by a dotted white border. Two white lines cross each other diagonally, once in the upper right and once in the lower left, framing the central circle. Two horizontal white lines are positioned above and below the text.

STEADFAST

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is stand still. The pressures of life and society, the pain and struggle we experience, can make us shaky in our faith. When you are holding on to the last rung of the ladder, be encouraged and stand firm. Christ is faithful to you and will help you remain steadfast in Him.

STEADFAST • 2 Thessalonians 1:1–12 • Don Everts • November 3, 2019

I feel like I am among family this morning. Partly, this is because we are in the same stream within the church—I am an ECO pastor, I work at Bonhomme Presbyterian Church, a 203-year-old ECO church in the St. Louis area. Partly, I feel at home because we're in Colorado—I lived and worked in Colorado with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship for 11 years. I lived in Boulder, but if you can forgive me for that, there's a real bond among we Coloradans.

I worked on college campuses with InterVarsity for 14 years and have worked at Bonhomme for 11 years now. Probably most important to know about me is that I've been married to Wendy for 23 years now, and we have three children—one in college, one in high school and one in middle school. Here's a photo for those who were wondering and yes, I very much "married up"! As I began hanging out in 2 Thessalonians in preparation for today, my thoughts went to these guys again and again.

In particular, Paul's reflection on his prayers for the Thessalonians made me reflect on my own prayers for my family. In verse 11 that we just heard read, Paul mentions that "we always pray for you"—and I guess I could say the same about my family and those dearest to me. I imagine this is a common experience: we intercede in prayer most often for the people we're thinking about the most.

While this is true for me—I pray for my children more than I pray for anyone—I have to admit that I don't always know what to pray for. For example, for years I'd say my most common prayer for my children was: "God may they meet with encouragement today." Especially when one of the kids is going through a tough season, that prayer intensifies: "God may Simon meet with encouragement today. Could you do that? Could you give him a good day where he succeeds and is treated well?"

But all along I've known that that probably isn't a complete enough prayer. Before I ever had kids I heard Steve Hayner (one time president of InterVarsity and Columbia Theological Seminary) tell the story of dropping one of his children off at college and chatting with some other parents who were dropping their kids off. Steve said he asked the other parent: "What do you want for your child at college?" And the parent responded: "I just want her to be happy." And Steve said (I'll never forget this): "Oh, I want so much more for my chil-

dren than that." A pretty brazen comment, which I assume Steve delivered with kindness.

But that comment has haunted me over the last 20 years. When I pray my heart's go-to prayer ("may Victor meet with encouragement today") that comment's right there: Is that it, Don? Don't you want more for your children than that? And so, I do pray for more ... but I struggle with that part of the prayer. "And if Teya meets discouragement or disappointment or struggles or suffering today ... Father ... could you ... use that in her life ... in some ... really encouraging way?"

In some ways my struggles in prayer have revealed to me how much I have to learn about moments and seasons of suffering. Which is what I so appreciate about the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians.

PAUL'S PRAYER FOR THE THESSALONIANS

This second letter from Paul to the young believers in Thessalonica addresses three main issues going on in their life: 1) some confusions they had about the second coming of Jesus; 2) a habit among some in the church to not work and just live off the generosity of others; and 3) the reality that they were in a season of persecution and affliction.

Chapter 1 addresses this third topic and gives us insight into how Paul himself prayed for these new believers in light of their difficult season. In a sense, Paul starts where many of us start when praying for those who are dear to us; he asks God to bless them. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 1:2). This is where I often start in my own prayers: I lay my hand on my child's head in bed at night and pray God's blessings upon them—God's grace, God's peace, God's goodness to be upon them.

But it's what Paul writes next that I find so helpful in growing my faith, beliefs, and priorities ... and thereby filling out my prayers for my own kids. Listen to verses 3 and 4 again: "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring" (2 Thessalonians 1:3–4).

Paul tells them that he is praying prayers of thanks

to God because of the presence of three things in their life: faith, love, and steadfastness. In the midst of their suffering their faith is growing, their love is increasing, and they are steadfast. This is noteworthy: Paul gave thanks for these same three things when he first wrote to them. In the beginning of his first letter we read, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thessalonians 1:2–3). Paul is thrilled because their faith is growing, their love is increasing, and they continue to be steadfast. This gives us great insight into the Christian experience of suffering—and what to hope for and pray for those who are not being "met with encouragement" as we may prefer.

FAITH, LOVE AND STEADFASTNESS

This helps me fill out my own prayers. "God, may Teya meet with encouragement today, but if she meets discouragement or disappointment or struggles or suffering today ... Father, would you grow her faith?" Faith is trust, of course. Trust in God. When someone is struggling, we can pray for them that God would allow their trust in Him to grow. (We can even pray that for ourselves! If we are struggling, we can of course pray that God would take the suffering away, but then we can go on: if this suffering can not be lifted, Father, use this to grow my trust in You.)

We also pray that our love would increase. We all know how suffering can cause us to close in on ourselves, grow tight-fisted and short with those around us. And so we can pray (for our children, our friends, ourselves): God, if suffering comes today, increase my love, keep me from turning in on myself.

And finally, Paul's prayers guide us to pray for this thing called "steadfastness"—perhaps your translation calls this "perseverance" or, as the King James version put it, "patience". The Greek version here is *hupomones* and literally means bearing up under a weight. Steadfastness is this state of having a weight on you, but not giving up, not falling down, not collapsing. If any of you are runners you know this experience: running is basically an experience in feeling pain but not stopping. Runners have *hupomones*—they feel the weight, but they bear up under it.

This is a powerful thing to pray for: Father, may

Victor meet with encouragement today, but if he meets with struggles, give him *hupomones*, Father, steadfastness, the ability to bear up under that weight. Strengthen him, Father. Do you see how helpful this chapter is? To those who were being persecuted and undergoing struggles, Paul prayed for God's grace and peace ... and he went a step further, praying for faith, love, and steadfastness. For any of us here, the implications of this are profound, in what we look for in our own lives, what we pray for during tough seasons in our own life, and how we pray for those that we love.

OUR TOUGH SEASON

I'm becoming increasingly convinced that these are truths we desperately need in our own day and age. Remember how Paul encouraged young Timothy to preach the gospel "in season and out of season"? This was a sober acknowledgement on Paul's part that there are going to be seasons when the gospel is more accepted and embraced, and there are going to be seasons when the gospel is unpopular and vilified.

It's in these tough seasons that God's people are tempted, like everyone who's taking it on the chin, to either fight or flight. When Christians are suffering for their faith (like the believers in Thessalonica) it is mighty tempting to either choose Door #1) punch back, or Door #2) run away. It's at those moments when we need to be reminded that there is a third door: Door #3) Faith, Love and Steadfastness.

I believe we are in one of those seasons. Christianity, once regally assigned a seat of prominence and privilege and trust near the center of our culture, has been re-seated a bit closer toward the margins of our culture. While the state of Christianity in the West is nowhere near as precarious and dangerous as it is in many places in the world today, it is nonetheless true that Christianity in the West has entered into a tough season.

Which means you and I are going to be more tempted than ever by Door #1) getting bitter and angry and punching back, or Door #2) getting fed up and withdrawing as much as we can from our surrounding culture. We desperately need Paul's words to remind us that there is a third Door, a third way: to have our faith grow, our love for our neighbors increase, and our steadfastness strengthen.

Friends, with the help of Jesus we can persevere. We can. Remember how Paul put it toward the end of the chapter: "To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, 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 1:11–12). By God's power, according to His grace, we can (even in the tough seasons) experience a growing trust in God, an increasing love for others, and a strengthening of our hupomones.

And when that happens, glory really does go to God. When people see us filled with faith and love and steadfastness, they will recognize that something greater must be at play. This is exactly how it happened with the early church. Origen saw the whole world as a theater filled with spectators, all watching to see how the Christians would respond to persecution. And they responded with an inexplicable faith, love and hupomones. And this got the world's attention:

- Tertullian wrote that Christian "patience" was "exceedingly attractive"
- Lactantius called it "invincible patience"
- Justin called it "strange patience" and noted how intrigued people were by it
- Felix commented that this beautiful response made pagans want to join the ranks of Christians.

Alan Kreider wrote in his wonderful book, "The Patient Ferment of the Early Church," that "the improbable rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire, makes the case that it was this posture of Faith, Love, and Steadfastness that drew people into the church, causing the surprising growth of a persecuted religion." The first books Christians wrote (they called them treatises) were not about evangelism, by the way; they were about hupomones. The world saw this faith, love, and steadfastness and was intrigued.

I've been wondering, is this possible in our own age? If we resist the temptation to anger or escape, if we pray for growing faith, increasing love, and steadfastness ... could Jesus be glorified in us? Could people come to faith because of our strange, beautiful posture? Now that's worth praying for.

STUDY GUIDE

STEADFAST • "Hang in There"

2 Thessalonians 1:1–12

UP: UP: Connect with God through Spending Time in His Word¹

Read aloud the passage for the week: 2 Thessalonians 1:1–12.

- 1) Reread verse 3. Why is it right to thank God, as Paul is doing in this verse?
- 2) How is it that the increase in faith among the Thessalonians leads to increased love for one another?
- 3) Describe a time when you have been grateful for the encouragement of fellow believers.
- 4) Reread verse 4. Paul celebrates the perseverance of the Thessalonians in the face of persecution. When have you experienced something which has made you question your faith?
- 5) What led you to persevere or stay connected to Christian community during that time?
- 6) Reread verses 6–10. God promises to hold on to us when we can't hold on to Him, and He promises to set all things right in the end. Thinking about your own life, your community or the world, what kind of things most make you desire to see God's justice done?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Last week you named and prayed for someone in your life who needs to know Jesus. Continue praying for them this week and look for one opportunity to begin a spiritual conversation with that person.

IN: Connect with Each Other

Take a moment to pray for other believers in your life who are experiencing difficult times using the kind of language that Paul uses in verses 3–4 and 11–12. Send a quick message to one of the people you prayed for with an encouragement and a quote from one of these verses.

¹ Many of the questions in this week's guide were drawn from: Return of the King: 2 Thessalonians, (Buderim, Australia: Lakeshore Community Church of Christ, 2014), 4-5. https://lakeshorechurch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/talks/pdf/2_Thessalonians_Study_Book.pdf