

STANDING FIRM V. “Steadfast”

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1 Thess. 2:17-3:13

INTRODUCTION

For several weeks, we've had an ongoing battle with some Brewer's Blackbirds at our house. First, they built a nest in a row of Junipers we have along the West side of our house that leave a corridor about eight feet wide between these high bushes (almost trees) and the house. Anytime we'd go out the garage door on that side of the house, they would dive-bomb us. They are incredible flyers, swooping down that narrow corridor, always attacking from behind you and pull up just before reaching your head so you'd get the whoosh of wings and air right by your ear. Polly's been known to exit the garage door with her arms waving over her head to prevent an attack.

But they've grown even bolder, scolding us wherever we are in the yard, with several blackbirds fluttering constantly overhead, and every now and then when you're not looking making one of the dive-bombing runs on us. Once Polly was bending over in the yard and one came and hit her a glancing blow on the rear end. They've even taken to angrily swooping toward our windows when they see us through the windows. Shiny black with their yellow eyes, they look sinister and threatening. The boldness of their sudden sneak attacks is intimidating. It takes a bit of courage and persistence on our part to not surrender our yard to the blackbirds.

Intimidation is a pretty effective tool, and it is one of Satan's favorites. If you decide to go out and do anything for Jesus, you can be sure you will encounter some kind of intimidation. It may only be fears that arise in your mind about what might happen. Sometimes we run into people who with their bluster and boldness in the ways of the world intimidate us, making us feel weak and ineffectual in countering their confidence. We know about peer pressure causing us to be afraid of being different. Someone said, “Sometimes silence is golden. Other times it's just plain yellow.”

When I was in my first church, I remember walking up the main street one evening to a Bible study we were having in a member's home. I was carrying my Bible, and as I came to pass the gas station where a bunch of the local life hung out, I moved my Bible to the other side of my body hoping they wouldn't notice it. Then, as I crossed the street, I thought, “What a cowardly thing to do. What difference did it make what those guys thought of me?” But the very thought of their possible disapproval was intimidating to me. It's seems like I've far too much of that throughout my life.

And when bad things happen to us, it can shake our confidence. We receive a devastating medical report. A young teenager's life is suddenly snuffed out in an accident as happened last week in our community. An event like the Virginia Tech massacre happens. Serious fissures

arise in relationships in our home. All these and much more can spread fear in our hearts. As Christians following the Master, we'd like to think our lives will be all smooth sailing with our loving heavenly Father keeping every evil thing from touching us. Then, when trouble comes, the Enemy is right there suggesting God is not trustworthy and our faith is shaken, causing us to want to retreat to a safe place.

Our Scripture this morning offers us wonderful help. Paul has sent Timothy to check on the Christians in Thessalonica in northern Greece to “strengthen and encourage” them in their faith “so that no one would be unsettled by these trials” (3:2-3). I'm amazed at how little it takes sometimes to unsettle us, to shake our faith. So we need to pay attention to what Paul is saying here. Since we've been away from my 1 Thessalonians series for a couple of weeks, let me remind you of the context. This is the first book written in the New Testament, written less than 2 decades after Pentecost and the birth of the church. Paul's ministry there was very short, numbering only a few weeks before persecution drove him out of town. So, throughout this letter, there is that note of concern— just how are they holding up under the persecution? Will they get discouraged and give up? Notice in the beginning verse, Paul refers to his sudden departure in the middle of the night as being “torn away” from them.

READ: 1 Thess. 2:17-3:13

TRIALS

Paul refers to attempts to get back to them, “but Satan stopped us” (18). We don't know what this was, but Paul is clear about the source of the problem. I like the way he just takes this in stride. He reminds them of his warning that they could expect to be persecuted. All this is from Satan. Paul also refers to him as “the tempter” in 3:5. It sounds like these Thessalonians were being assaulted by serious temptations to succumb to sin, to rebel against God, or to just abandon it all and return to the ways of the world. But throughout, there is this unwavering confidence that though Satan may win a few little skirmishes here and there, the overall battle belongs to the Lord— our victory in the long-run is assured. He reminds them of the coming of the Lord Jesus when this victory will be final and justice will be served on the Enemy and all those who have become enemies of God.

Since Paul couldn't get back to them, he sent Timothy to encourage them and is excited over the good news Timothy brings back.

Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.

(3:7-8)

Standing firm in the Lord is a wonderful statement. I've taken it as a title for this whole series because it describes so much of what we see in these Thessalonians. Wouldn't that be something you'd like said of you, that you were standing firm in the Lord— especially when facing massive trials and even outright persecution?

Here we are given an inspiring example of Christian community. Paul sees intercessory prayer on their behalf as crucial in all this. He speaks of praying night and day “most earnestly” (10).

The Greek word here is a double compound that literally means, “abundantly, overflowing all bounds.” And he ends the chapter with wonderful prayer for them, which we’ll consider in a moment.

When we feel intimidated by the trials and testings of life that seem like blackbirds bombarding us— the answer is not a pep talk but prayer. Courage is not something we need to work up in ourselves. Dr. Ogilvie observes, “Courage is fear that has been on its knees in prayer.” As we pray and immerse the thing which intimidates us into the context of God’s plan, purposes, and power, we realize God is bigger than all our fears and it is far more important to obey Him.

A number of years ago, in another church, I was called by God to confront a terrible sin in a young man in the church. After doing this prayerfully, involving others who loved him and could support him, it felt like all hell broke loose. I began to receive almost daily calls from his mother who would pour out her pain, telling me how wrong I’d been in doing this. According to her, I’d ruined their lives. I felt I was supposed to listen with empathy— for I could understand how painful this was to her and her family, and they were facing some devastating things. But, it was uncanny (and later I recognized it was also diabolical) how she could twist everything and heap guilt upon me. It was wearing on me and continued for weeks. One afternoon, I was at the end of my rope, absolutely in despair about what to do. I “happened” to run into a couple that afternoon, one of the few who knew about the situation, and they sensed something was wrong and asked if they could pray for me. As they laid hands on me to pray, it was like an inner dam of despair gave way within. After shedding buckets of tears, I returned to my study and the Lord gave me a Scripture, Ps 138:2c-3—

For you have exalted above all things

Your name and your word.

When I called, you answered me;

you made me bold and stouthearted.

And, indeed, the Spirit did make me bold and stouthearted. I recognized it all as harassment from the enemy and I wasn’t going to be intimidated any longer. I believe I received just one more phone call, and while I was kind and caring, I was incredibly stouthearted— a Spirit given gift through prayer.

At the beginning of this month, Father Ragheed Ganni at age 35, along with three of his deacons, at Holy Spirit Parish was killed by terrorists in Mosul, Iraq. To add insult to injury, the terrorists surrounded the bodies with explosives to prevent police and parishioners from removing them. Ganni was a brilliant man with a degree in engineering and went to Rome to study theology. He was fluent in French, Italian, and English as well as Arabic. He had the opportunity to spend his life working safely in the Vatican. But he insisted on returning to his native Iraq saying simply, “This is where I belong; that is my place.” Courage. Standing firm and tall.

PRAYER

Now, let’s turn to this great prayer Paul prays for them, 3:12-13:

12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone

else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

I see two petitions here that we would do well to incorporate in our prayers. Paul always models such depth for us in his prayers— so far beyond our often trite, “God bless....” These prayers move at the depths of our soul issues and touch things far more important than our often temporal concerns like health and wealth. Now it is not wrong to pray for our temporal needs; the “give us this day our daily bread” petition of the Lord’s Prayer. But, there are even more important petitions which we often don’t make. So let’s allow these two petitions to challenge us.

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.... If your relationship with Jesus is not making you a more loving person, something major is amiss. Here’s a petition we can incorporate in our prayers for the rest of our lives, asking the Lord to increase our love so it overflows to everyone. Eugene puts it in a vivid image for us in The Message,

*May the Master pour on the love
so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you.....*

Then, this second, longer petition:

May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Here is a prayer for strength to be pure, holy, without fault before God. How much do you pray for a truly pure heart? I’m afraid we’ve grown rather comfortable with a certain amount of sin in our life— “After all, nobody’s perfect,” we say. But remember, this life is about developing our souls for eternity. Last Sunday, I quoted Gary Thomas’ Biblical insight that God’s purpose in our marriages is more about making us holy than happy. Indeed, that applies to your job, and absolutely everything in your life. This includes the difficulties, the set-backs, the problem people you deal with. It is all about making us holy. Knowing that radically changes our perspective.

“Holy” is not a very attractive word to most of us I’m afraid. Long, somber faces and “holier than thou” come to mind. But Jesus is the perfect human expression of what it means to be holy. So substitute that in this prayer if it helps. Then it is asking God to purge our hearts of everything that is not Christ-like in our thoughts, attitudes, and actions (“blameless and holy”). It ends with a reminder that we will stand before God and then all will be exposed. This will happen when Jesus returns in glory.

CONCLUSION

I think most of us have areas in our walk with Christ where we’ve pulled back to a “safe position.” We’re afraid of what might happen if we get out there too far. The enemy has us intimidated. And that’s exactly how he wants it.

Sir Francis Drake, the great English explorer of 16th century England, the first Englishman to circumnavigate the globe, prayed:

Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little, when we arrive safely because we have sailed too close to the shore....

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery; where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes; and to push into the future in strength, courage, hope, and love.

I would add that, very importantly, all our dreams and ventures need to be from God– not just our seeking excitement. But, as He leads, we will indeed be moved out of our narrow, confining comfort zones.

Tom Yoder did this. He was a Peace Corps volunteer who had worked six months to try to earn the trust of an African tribe so he could share with them plans for irrigation, crop rotation, and ways to market their surplus fruits and vegetables. But he remained a distrusted outsider.

Then one day, he learned of a hut where people had fallen ill and everyone was afraid to go near. Tom went to see if he could help and immediately recognized it was yellow-fever. For the next six days, Tom fed, nursed, and bathed the family until each was strong enough to be transported 90 mi. to a hospital. All recovered completely.

After that, Tom had their trust and was called “the great fearless one.” But, in his journal, Tom wrote, “It’s easy to be fearless when you’ve been vaccinated against a disease.”

Do you realize, in Jesus we are vaccinated against all the intimidating, fear-inducing things of this world? The last night He was with His disciples, He assured them, *Take courage, I have overcome the world.* He precedes that with, *in me you may have peace* (Jn. 16:33). That is true for all who have received the risen Christ into their lives. All Satan can ultimately do is bluff. We have the One who has overcome the world in us and He has promised never to leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5; Mtt. 28:20).