

Theme: Be Encouraged by the Lord
2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5
June 8, 2008

How do you say goodbye? Is it with hugs? If it is someone you love dearly, do you cry? Maybe you just wave. Maybe you don't like to say goodbye at all! Graduation is a bit of a goodbye. I expect to see most of you from time to time. Some of you I expect to see weekly, if you know what I mean. Paul reached the end of the things he needed to say in his letter to the Christians at Thessalonica and now he had to say goodbye. His words are very fitting for our goodbye today on your graduation from St. John Lutheran School. As we say goodbye today, let us be encouraged by the Lord as we pray for each other and as we are strengthened by the Lord.

"Pray for me," people often ask of others. They know the power of prayer, which is the power behind the prayer and they want that power in their lives. Paul can't help but pray for those he loves in Christ. Most of the Thessalonians he didn't know very well, but he loved them as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. So he offers up a prayer for them. "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."

Paul prays to the God who gives us encouragement and hope. He is the Lord Jesus Christ, the promised and chosen Messiah. He was bloodied, beaten, pierced, to pay the ransom price demanded by all of your sins. He rose again to prove to you that he is the only-begotten Son of God, who guarantees that you also will rise from the dead to live under his lordship in heaven forever. Paul prays to God our Father, who loved us by his grace, his undeserved love which he showed to sinful people who did not deserve it. He is our dear Father who through his Son gave us we can go in any trouble. This is the God to whom Paul addresses his prayer for the Thessalonians. We might say Paul goes right to the top to be sure that his beloved Thessalonians are cared for by the best.

Paul also prays that the Thessalonians be strengthened. Just as the athlete continually works out to get stronger so that he can endure the rigors of his sport, so also the Christian needs to be strengthened to survive in the world. When Christians are reminded of such undeserved love that God shows us, it certainly encourages and strengthens them in their resolve to stand firm in God's truths, to speak the truth in love and to live their lives to the glory of their gracious God. This was Paul's hope and prayer for the Thessalonians and for us as well.

We join with Paul and offer this prayer for you today too. We pray for you, graduates. Some of the best times of your lives are just beginning, but also some of the most challenging. So we ask God, who loves us with an undeserved, gracious love that he would continually remind you of the good hope of eternal life that you have through Jesus Christ, God's Son. All of your sins have been paid for, that means that you can live each and every day confident of an eternal home in heaven. We pray that God may strengthen you that you can excel in a world that has become increasingly immoral. We pray that God would help you live for Christ, that every word out of your mouth and every thing you do will reflect your great love for God who has shown such great love for you.

While Paul cannot help remembering the Thessalonians in his prayers, he reaches out to them and asks for something from them. He writes, “Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith.” Paul asks that the Thessalonians would pray for him.

Notice what Paul asks for first. He doesn’t ask that they pray that he receives a good salary. He doesn’t ask that they pray for his safety. He asks that they pray for the spread of the gospel. This is the most important thing that Paul can think of. If the Word of God doesn’t spread, then many more will die without knowing Jesus as their Savior. If it weren’t for the Word of God, there wouldn’t be any believers in Thessalonica. Paul asks the Thessalonians to help him in his work by praying that God would continue to spread the good news of forgiveness of sins through Jesus in the whole world.

As much as Paul wanted everyone in the world to believe in Jesus, he knew that wasn’t going to happen. He knew he would encounter plenty of people who “do not have faith.” They will oppose the spread of the gospel and try to stop people from giving honor to God. Paul has met this opposition before. They spoke against Paul’s message. They put him in prison. They tried to kill him. So you can see why Paul wanted their prayers.

Graduates, pray for us. Pray for St. John Lutheran Church and School, that God will use us to continue to spread the life-giving Word of Christ. You have benefitted from it and been blessed by it, not pray that this church and school will be a blessing to others. Pray that it will strengthen young people in good hope so that they can face the world where there are many who do not have faith. Pray that we may be an instrument to spread the gospel in our community that many more may come to enjoy the blessings that you have enjoyed. We will pray for you and we need your prayers as well.

With each day that passes there will be more uncertainty in your life. Right now you are mostly concerned with the uncertainties of beginning high school and what outfits you will wear. But soon you will be faced with greater uncertainties of what career will I choose? Which boyfriend or girlfriend is the one? Peer pressure will grow astronomically. As you enjoy more freedom and independence, you will also feel the pressure of greater responsibility. As uncertain as all this sounds, there is one thing that we can be sure of. Paul explains when he says, “But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.”

God is faithful to all of his promises. Where evil men exist who stand opposed to the gospel and work to bring about its demise, the Lord stands constantly at our side to strengthen and protect us. He is faithful. That is, he is trustworthy, reliable, true to his promises. He will never fail us. Therefore we have nothing to fear. “The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid” (Ps 118:6). There is no reason for us to become “unsettled” in our faith if Christ is at our side, and we are firmly grounded in his word of truth. He will strengthen and protect us “from the evil one.” This is Satan who is our great enemy.

Because it is the faithful Lord who is strengthening you we can be confident that you will continue to live in what you have been taught. Paul was confident of the same things from the

Thessalonians when he wrote, “We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command.” I am confident that with the Lord’s help you will continue to believe the Word of God. I am confident that you will continue to obey that Word. You will cast aside every false teaching that opposes God’s Word and continually grow through the Word and the Sacraments.

Today we say goodbye in a sense, but we don’t do it with hugs and handshakes, we do it with our prayers and with our confidence in the Lord. You are in good hands, the Lord who has redeemed you with his precious blood will continue to protect you and keep you. He will lift you up on eagle’s wings, comforting words that you chose as your class hymn. God bless you and encourage you and strengthen you as you graduate today and God be with you in all of your hopes, dreams and plans for the future. Amen.