

How Will God Sustain Us?

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[0:00] Well, imagine with me for a moment that you've just come upon a house, and it's on fire. And as you drive up, you see witnesses are already gathering around. You see the firefighters are arriving on the scene.

And you also notice that not everyone has escaped from the house. There's a young boy, and he's trapped up in the upstairs bedroom. And he's leaning out the window, calling out for help. And the firefighters, they can't get inside because the house has already been engulfed in flames. All the hallways are already on fire. His bedroom door is too hot to open. They can't get in. And the boy's dad is standing at the window.

And he's looking up, and he's calling to his son, begging for him to jump, to jump from the window. Come, jump. I'll save you. I'll catch you. It's the boy's only chance of escape. It's his only way of surviving. He has to jump. And as the fire sweeps into his bedroom, at the very last moment, he jumps from the window into his father's outstretched arms. Now, fast forward a couple weeks later.

[1:00] The boy and his father are now out going to the swimming pool. And the boy is just learning how to swim. He's really young. He hasn't been in the water too much. And so his dad leads him over to the side of the pool in the shallow end.

And the dad gets in the water, and he says to the boy, Come on, jump in. Jump in the water. I'll catch you. I'll catch you. And the boy refuses. I can't do it. I'm too scared. It's not safe. I don't know if you can actually catch me. And he won't do it. He refuses to jump in the water. Now, you might be thinking, What's this boy's reasoning here?

What's he doing? He's not thinking straight. Or, if nothing else, he's got a really poor memory. I mean, his father had just saved him from a two-story fall out of a burning building. And now he doesn't think his dad can save him from jumping into the pool.

And yet, how easy is it for us to have the same mindset as the boy when it comes to our God's ability to save? Why do we doubt God? Why do we struggle to trust him?

[2:05] Why do we think he can't save us from our present circumstances? Because, more often than we want to think, we've forgotten his greatest act of salvation.

We have forgotten that we once were God's enemies, and yet he called us to be his children. We forgot that we once were in the kingdom of darkness, and yet he has called us into the kingdom of light. We have forgotten that we once were alienated from him because of our sin, and yet he has drawn near to us to reconcile us to himself.

This reminder that we so readily need, the early Christians needed just as well. Our God is a saving God. God is in the business of saving. That's what he does.

So whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, whatever struggles we might be enduring, we have a God who is for us, and he's proven it to us by sending us his son. Because God has saved us to eternal life, we can be sure that he will work to sustain us in every trial we face.

Because God has saved us to eternal life, we can be sure that he will work to sustain us in whatever trial that we face. Well, turn with me to 2 Thessalonians 2, where we will see Paul reminding the Thessalonian believers, and now us, of this very reality.

[3:26] 2 Thessalonians 2, And we'll begin reading in verse 13. 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.

Now, let's back up for just a minute to get kind of the big picture of what's going on in this passage. Paul here, in 2 Thessalonians, is really addressing one main issue, that being false teaching. What we believe affects how we live our lives. And if you ever doubted that, if you maybe are thinking, I'm not sure if I believe that, just read 2 Thessalonians, and you will see that what the Thessalonians believed affected the way they lived their lives.

[4:46] These believers were being taught by some that the day of the Lord had come, that the end was upon us, and that Christ would surely, certainly be coming very soon.

These people were teaching that Jesus was right here. He was here. And as a result of that, these believers were now quitting their jobs. They weren't upholding their responsibilities because they were saying, well, if the day of the Lord has arrived, then we don't really need to work anymore. We don't need to take care of our families anymore. We don't have to do any of that. Because Jesus is practically here. So Paul writes this letter to say that the day of the Lord has not arrived yet, and therefore continue in your work.

Continue to be responsible Christians. So look with me at chapter 2, beginning in verse 1. Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

Let no one deceive you in any way, for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first. And then Paul goes on to tell of what that will look like. So Paul sets out to correct false doctrine.

[6:06] Here's the true doctrine, he says. Here's sound teaching. Let me tell you, the day of the Lord has not come, and when it does come, here's what it will look like. Now, look with me further on in the letter at how Paul tells the believers to live as a result of his new teaching to them, or his rehashing the true teaching.

Beginning in chapter 3, verse 6. Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness, and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you. And so Paul wants to show them this is true teaching.

But even more importantly, he doesn't just want to tell them about this one true teaching, but even more importantly, he wants to remind them to stand firm in all of the truth of the gospel.

He wants them to remember what he had taught them, and that involves this standing firm. This call to stand firm is significant because the Thessalonians, they weren't just being taught incorrect doctrine.

[7:15] They weren't just being taught these wrong ideas, but they were also being persecuted for believing the truth. So they were being persecuted for what they believed. So Paul doesn't just call them to stand firm in the truth, but then he prays for them.

He prays for them in verses 16 and 17, that they would stand firm in the midst of persecution. The substance of his prayer can be summarized like this. Because God has called you Thessalonian believers, you can be sure he will work to sustain you in the midst of this persecution and false teaching.

God has not changed since Paul penned this prayer. The God who can comfort and encourage the Thessalonians can also comfort and encourage us. And so we too can say, because God has called us, because God has saved us, we can be sure he will work to sustain us in every trial of life. This is Paul's basic line of reasoning in the prayer. He works from the greater to the lesser. God has saved us from eternal damnation, he says. Paul says that he's loved us and given us eternal comfort or eternal encouragement and good hope.

So if God can do that, if he can give us this eternal comfort, then can't God give us comfort in the midst of any trials we're facing now? If God can save us from eternal torment, he can certainly save us from whatever struggle we experience now.

[8:42] Paul's working from the lesser to the greater, from the greater to the lesser. He speaks of God's greatest act of encouragement, an eternal encouragement. And he says, what couldn't God encourage us in?

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he kind of spells out this eternal encouragement to them. And he gives them the good news of the gospel, this eternal encouragement.

He says, you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

And now in 2 Thessalonians, he reminds them of this reality once more. He reminds them of this salvation once again. By God's grace, Thessalonians, you turned from dead idols to serve the living God.

If God could do that work in you, don't you think he could meet your needs now? And God has done the same miraculous transformation in us. He has caused us to turn from serving dead idols to serving the living God.

[9:43] If he could do that work in us, can't he do a work to meet all of our needs now? Because God has saved us. We can be sure he will work to sustain us in every trial of life.

But this begs the question, how? How does God work to sustain us? How will God meet me in the trials I'm enduring? How will God work with me, walk with me in life, upholding me through my struggles?

Well, Paul gives us two ways. He gives us two ways that God is at work to sustain us. First, he shows us that God works in our hearts. He shows us that God works in our hearts.

Look at verses 16 and 17 again of chapter 2. We see a few things going on in these verses. First, we see that Paul directs his prayer to both God the Father and God the Son.

Then there's this kind of qualifying phrase that further describes God the Father. He's the one who loved us. He's the one who gave himself for us. He's the one who gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace.

[10:50] But, we don't find the main verbs of the prayer just yet. We don't find what Paul desires God to do until we come to verse 17. Look down at verse 17.

In that verse, the two main verbs of this prayer appear where Paul asks that God would both comfort and establish. So, if we focus on these two verbs, we see the two ways that God is at work to sustain us.

The first way is in our hearts. Paul prays that God would comfort our hearts. Now, for many of you that have the NIV, the word that's translated there is encourage. But, those are very synonymous ideas and oftentimes, that Greek word that's translated here, encourage, is translated comfort elsewhere.

Like, 2 Corinthians chapter 1. It's a really famous passage of comfort. And that's the same word that we see here. And it's the word for to be comforted. So, I just wanted to address that real briefly to show that encouragement and comfort are very similar synonymous ideas here.

So, what does Paul mean by that? What does he mean by comfort your hearts? That God would comfort our hearts? What exactly is involved with comforting or encouraging? Well, I think that Paul helps us to understand what he means for God to comfort us even earlier in the letter.

[12:04] He asked that the Thessalonians, back in chapter 2, would not be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed by the false teaching that was being spread. So, we can maybe reason from that that someone who lacks comfort or someone who lacks encouragement is someone who's quickly shaken in mind or somebody who's alarmed.

For the Thessalonians, the persecution they faced and the false teaching they faced were capable of shaking them and alarming them. These realities prompted Paul to pray for their comfort.

Thinking back to the story of the boy and his father, when the boy refused to jump into his dad's arms in the pool, he was showing that he lacked comfort. He was quickly shaken in mind. He was alarmed at the thought of his dad failing to catch him.

So, what alarms us? What causes us to be shaken in mind? Maybe it's something in our job. Maybe it's something at home. Maybe it's something at school. Maybe it's a relationship with a family member or with a friend or with a neighbor.

Maybe it's something related to our health or to the health of someone we love. Whatever causes us alarm, whatever causes us to be shaken, shows an area of our lives in which we need God to come and comfort us.

[13:18] We need God to do a work in our hearts. I don't want to be too ambiguous here. So, I tried to think of some very practical ways, some very tangible ways that we see God comforting us.

Because God, he operates by using means. Through his spirit, he uses means to bring us comfort. Our comfort doesn't just come one day magically.

One day we're discouraged and the next day we feel comfort and we're at peace. But comfort comes as a result of certain realities taking root in our lives. Our comfort, it's the result of God doing a work through something in our lives.

And so, the first means of comfort is God's revelation of himself in his word. As we know God's word better, we come to know God better. As we know God better, we see who he is better. We see his character more clearly. And that should bring us comfort. Take the Thessalonians, for example. They were discomfited. They were alarmed because of the false teaching that they were learning.

[14 : 21] They were alarmed at the thought that the day of the Lord had actually arrived. And so, Paul writes to them and in teaching them true doctrine, he expects and he anticipates that this will bring them comfort.

And the same holds true for us. As we feed ourselves with sound doctrine, as we come to know God more fully through his word, God will produce comfort in the midst of the struggles of our life. So, let's think about it. As we come to understand God's sovereignty better, that should bring us comfort. As we come to understand God's grace better, that should bring us comfort. As we come to understand God's goodness better, that should bring us comfort.

God comforts our hearts. He works in us to sustain us in our struggles by teaching us more of himself. As we stand firm in the truth of God's word, God encourages and upholds us in the face of sin and in the face of brokenness and in the face of pain in this life.

But God doesn't just answer Paul's prayer for comfort by giving us himself and his word. He also answers Paul's prayer for comfort. By giving us his people. If you do just a simple study of the word comfort in the New Testament, you'll see that oftentimes comfort is associated with people.

[15 : 38] You'll see in passages like 2 Corinthians 1. How are God's people comforted? They're comforted by other people that they know. What does Paul say?

He says that as God comforts us, we can then comfort others. We can comfort one another. Or even later in 2 Corinthians, Paul says that he's comforted.

He actually talks about being comforted by the spiritual growth of the Corinthians themselves for having repented of their sins. This is what he says. I am acting with great boldness toward you. I have great pride in you. I am filled with comfort. A few verses on, Paul speaks of the comfort that Titus gave him, saying, But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus. Now, I think this verse is a wonderful picture of how God uses means, because God is the ultimate comforter of the downcast, and yet he is using Titus as the one to bring that comfort to Paul.

[16 : 38] In a similar manner, as Paul closes his letter to the Colossians, he says of certain believers, These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.

So the question to ask is, Who comforts you? Or maybe better, Who are you comforting? And the marvelous aspect of that is, it's the same answer for both.

We comfort one another. I comfort you, you comfort me. We as the local church can be a comfort to one another. God intends to use us to comfort each other, to bring comfort to our hearts, because the Spirit dwells in us and the Spirit dwells among us.

So we've seen first that God sustains us in the midst of our trials by working in our hearts. He comforts our hearts, and he does so by using means.

One of those means is through his word, and another of those means is through his people. Because God has saved us, we can be sure he will work to sustain us in every trial of life by comforting us with his word and with his people.

[17 : 47] God works in us also, though, to sustain us in another fashion. He also works out of us, out of our hearts, out of the overflow of our hearts.

Just as he works in our hearts, he works out of our hearts. Look back at verse 17, and we'll look at the second verb here. First, we see that Paul prays that we would be comforted, that God would comfort our hearts.

And second, he prays that God would establish us in every work and word. So now we turn from the internal work to the external work. God is sustaining us in the midst of our trials by establishing us or strengthening us in both word and deed.

Paul here, he's speaking of a pattern of behavior. He's talking of a way in which we act consistently and we speak consistently in ways which demonstrate our faith.

In a sense, his prayer is that we would be behaving more and more like Christ, that God would be molding us, that God would be shapening us, that God would be strengthening us and establishing us in a lifestyle of godliness.

[18:57] Paul speaks of this earlier in 2 Thessalonians 1, beginning in verse 11. To this end, we pray always 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.

So how is it then that God sustains us in the midst of trying circumstances? How is it that he upholds us when life seems to be crashing down all around us? Will we see that he sustains us with the hope and the reassurance that the good work he began in us, he will bring to completion? How can I endure this trial that I am facing? I can endure it because I know that God is conforming me to the image of his Son. The thought that Christ is being formed in us ought to be a motivation to persevere.

It's much like weightlifting or long-distance running. In the moment, it's painful and it hurts and we don't want to do it. Every part in our being says, I want to quit, I want to give up.

But what causes us to persevere? What causes us to continue to exert ourselves? Well, it's the knowledge that we're growing stronger through the pain. It's the knowledge that our muscles will rebuild stronger than they were before.

[20:26] And so in the same way, we can sustain the trials that we are in because God is at work to make us stronger through them. He is at work to cause godliness to grow up in us through them.

And so we can say, because God has saved us, we can be sure he will work to sustain us in every trial of life by conforming us more and more into the image of his son.

Our God is faithful to us. He has loved us and saved us through his son. He has given us eternal comfort through his son. How then will he sustain us in the midst of our present struggles?

How will he do this? Well, whatever trial we may be facing, we can be sure of two things. God is at work in our hearts and God is at work out of our hearts. He is using his word and he's using his people to comfort us.

God is working in our trials. He's working in the difficulties of life to shape us and to mold us into the likeness of his son. Because God has saved us to eternal life, we can be sure that he will work to sustain us in every trial that we face.

[21:36] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given us eternal encouragement through your son. We thank you for his life and his death and his resurrection and that through him we have hope of eternal life.

God, you are faithful to us. The very fact that we are here today proves your faithfulness to us. And so God, we pray that you would continue to strengthen us and to encourage us and that you would help us in the midst of our struggles to live lives that reflect the gospel, to live lives that reflect your glorious transformation in us.

And God, we pray that you would be strengthening us and establishing us in all of these things for your glory. In Christ's name we pray. Amen. Amen.