

The Prayers of the Apostle Paul  
1 Thessalonians 1:1-4

Sermon #2  
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## **A PRAYER FOR GOD'S ELECT PEOPLE**

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Please take your Bibles and turn to the first epistle of Paul to the Thessalonian church.

For those of you who were not with us last week, let me bring you up to date on what I am doing in our Sunday morning services. Last week I began a series of messages on "The Prayers of the Apostle Paul." We considered the ninth chapter of Acts, the chapter that gives us the story of the salvation of Saul of Tarsus who eventually became the Apostle Paul. We noted that one of the first comments that was made about Saul after he was saved, and that was made by the Lord Himself, was, "Behold, he prayeth" (Acts 9:11). Since it was the Lord Who said this about him, we know that it was not only true, but that Saul of Tarsus was really praying for the first time in his life. He was not just saying prayers (as I am sure that he had done many times before); he was really praying. Saul was a budding rabbi with great ambition. He hated Jesus Christ. He hated the church. But, in a moment of time his life was completely turned around, and, as he would write later, he was made a new creature in Christ.

From his epistles we can see that the praying which he began to do in those first days of his relationship with the Lord, he continued to do it throughout his life. He became a great apostle, great in the eyes of God, great in terms of his usefulness. The Holy Spirit used him to give us at least thirteen of the New Testament books, and possibly fourteen, if we include the book of Hebrews. He was a superb teacher, a zealous preacher, a great theologian. He probably did as much or more than anyone else to spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire in those early days. But, if I did not mention that he was a man of prayer, our picture of the Apostle Paul would be seriously incomplete. He was strong in the Word, but he was also strong in prayer. This was a combination which ought to be an example for all of us who know the Lord, and especially for those of us who have been called to serve the Lord in a special way.

Paul not only taught us the importance of prayer, but he also taught us how to pray. His prayers give us many illustrations of the burdens that were upon his heart. The prayers of Paul teach us that it is not only good to tell people that you are praying for them, but, at least in some instances (I do not say that this is always the case) it is good to tell people what your burden for them is. Paul did this over and over again.

We, the Lord's people, are weak in many ways, but it is most often the case that we are the weakest in prayer. Perhaps, when we talk about prayer, our hearts rebuke us because we are not more faithful than we are. The Apostle Paul has left us with a testimony in his epistles that prayer is where we ought to be the strongest. Not everybody can preach, not everybody can teach, not everybody is called to preach or teach. But all of

us are to pray--all of us who know the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul taught that we are to pray without ceasing. That means that we should not only have our times of private prayer, but that we should live prayerful lives. It should not be unusual for us to be praying throughout the day as we go about the work of the day. I hope that the time we will be spending in these next weeks considering the prayers of the Apostle Paul, will not only give us rich instruction in what true prayer is, but that the Holy Spirit will use our studies to make us pray more in the days to come than we have in the days past.

Those of you who were here last Sunday will remember, I hope, that I said that I would take up these prayers in more of a chronological order rather than the order in which they come in the New Testament. That is, I am not going to begin with Romans, which is his first epistle in order in the New Testament, but, as I have indicated already this morning, we are going to be starting with 1 Thessalonians because it is generally thought that the Thessalonian epistles were the first letters that Paul wrote to any of the churches. His prayers reveal where he was in his fellowship with the Lord, so that, if we take them up chronologically, we will have something of a spiritual autobiography of the Apostle Paul.

Please turn in your Bibles to the first prayer in chapter one of 1 Thessalonians, the first four verses.

There are really two prayers here: a prayer that God would bless them with grace and peace, which comes at the end of verse one, and then a prayer of thanksgiving follows. Let me read these four verses that we will be considering, and then we will look at them in detail in the time that we have this morning. This is what Paul had to say:

- 1 Paul, and Silvanus [Silas], and Timotheus [Timothy], unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- 2 We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers;
- 3 Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father;
- 4 Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God (1 Thess. 1:1-4).

### **I. PAUL'S PRAYER FOR GRACE AND PEACE (1 Thess. 1:1).**

The first prayer is for grace and peace. You will find a statement similar to this in all thirteen of Paul's epistles. So, in taking up this latter part of verse 1, I am covering what Paul said in twelve other epistles. You do not find it stated like this in the book of Hebrews. This is one reason that some of the Lord's people feel that Paul did not write the book of Hebrews. They feel that the pattern in the book of Hebrews is so different that it could not have been written by Paul. But that is not our concern here.

This prayer, "Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ," is not limited to Paul. We have it in both of Peter's epistles. The Apostle John used it in 2 John and in the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Some have questioned whether or not this is a prayer. They feel that it is just a greeting, as it certainly was; or an expression of hope, and it was that, too. But when you say to somebody, "the Lord bless you," it ought to be taken as a prayer. Though it is not said on your knees at that particular time, yet it should be looked upon as a prayer. We are asking the Lord to bless the person to whom

we say, “the Lord bless you.” I am sure that, as Paul met people on the street, if he knew that they were believers, it would not have been an uncommon thing for him to say, "Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." The people of the world can wish things, but we as believers can do more than wish, can't we? We can pray. So I am considering this as Paul's first prayer for the believers at Thessalonica. It is interesting to me that, right to the end of his life, Paul prayed this prayer for the people of God. In the case of Timothy and Titus he added the word "mercy," but basically the petition was exactly the same.

William Hendriksen, in his commentary on the books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, said that Paul used the word "grace" in his epistles about one hundred times, and that he used the word "peace" more than forty times. We know that these words were the customary greetings of even Greeks and Jews who did not know the Lord. That is, the customary greeting among the Gentiles would be *charis*, "grace." The customary greeting for Jews, as I am sure most of us know, would be *shalom*, "peace." So the Spirit of God has taken these two words which, when they were used either by Gentiles or Jews, expressed the hope that every need would be supplied that a person had: good health, prosperity in their work, and everything that would make life enjoyable. For the people of God it was both a greeting and a prayer, but the emphasis was predominantly spiritual.

Let me be more specific about the meaning of these words.

Grace speaks of blessings that we do not deserve, but it also speaks of the power of God bestowed upon us in grace. God's grace is God's power. It is by grace that we are saved, but after we are saved, we live by grace. We never outgrow our need for the grace of God. It is the grace of God which enables us to live in deliverance from sin day by day. It is the grace of God which enables us to be holy people. We cannot do either of these in our own strength. Included in the grace of God is the strength to face the trials of life, as well as the temptations which come to us from day to day. Paul, with great gratitude to God, told the Corinthian church, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10). In speaking of his work, he also said to the Corinthians, "According to the grace which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation" (1 Cor. 3:10). As Paul saw the blessing of God upon his life, he attributed all of the blessings to the grace of God. When Paul, in his letter to the Galatian churches, was reporting about his meeting with James and Peter and John, he said that, with regard to his ministry to the Gentiles, "They perceived the grace that was given unto me." There was not a part of Paul's life that had not been touched and blessed by the grace of God.

If it were not for the grace of God, we would not be here this morning. As long as we live we are going to need fresh supplies of grace every day. That is the reason we will never outgrow the need for others to pray this prayer for us. None of the people of God will ever outgrow this prayer. When you pray for somebody who knows the Lord, "Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," you are praying for something that is a constant need in their lives. So when Paul said, "Grace be unto you," he left nothing unsaid that needed to be said about the blessing of God upon the people of God.

Now, what about peace?

Someone once said (and I do not remember who it was, or where I read this) that "peace is the fruit of which grace is the root." That is just one way of saying that as we have experienced the grace of God in our lives,

so we will be experiencing the peace of God. Grace and peace are companions of each other. Grace precedes peace, but peace always follows grace. Peace comes when we really appropriate the grace of God. This is so very, very important, isn't it? Peace means that we are resting in the Lord. When we were saved, we experienced peace *with* God, but every day we live we need the peace *of* God, the peace resulting from the closest possible fellowship with the Lord.

But let us be sure that we understand that grace and peace are not characteristics that we have to produce for ourselves. We may constantly tell ourselves, "I just have to be quiet and peaceful about this situation I am facing." But as Paul prayed this prayer, repeating it over and over again, he was praying for that which we are not able to produce for ourselves. This is peace which comes, as you can see in your text, "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." And so the supply of grace and peace is inexhaustible. The people of God had been drawing upon the Father and the Son since this epistle was written, and long before. But the supply is just as great, the provision is just as abundant today, as it ever has been. The source of grace and peace can never be exhausted.

What a prayer this is! It is no wonder that Paul always prayed it because it deals with our basic needs as the people of God. Today we need the grace of God, and we need the peace of God, but we do not ever look for grace and peace apart from the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

But now let us go on to the second part of Paul's prayer.

## II. A PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING (1 Thess. 1:2-4).

Having said that, he went on to mention his thanksgiving to God: "We give thanks to God always for you all . . ." Notice the participles that he uses here: ". . . making mention . . . remembering . . . and knowing."

There is one thing I want to tell you as we begin looking at the prayers of the Apostle Paul. It is this: Get ready for a lot of prayers of thanksgiving. In fact, before we get out of 1 Thessalonians we are going to have another one. Look at chapter 2 verse 13:

For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

So there he expressed his thanksgiving to God again.

As he began this epistle, presumably the first epistle that he ever wrote to any church, he prayed that God and the Lord Jesus Christ would bless them with grace and peace. And immediately after he told them how he always thanked God for them, and prayed for them.

Paul had not been in Thessalonica very long. As far as we know he was the first one to take the Gospel there. He was forced out of Thessalonica by persecution when he would have wanted to stay there to continue his ministry to the people. God had done an amazing work in a very short period of time. But Paul here was indicating that, whatever went on in Thessalonica which was permanent and truly a work of God, none of the credit belonged to him. All of the glory belonged to God. That is the reason that he was continually thanking God for what He had done in the lives of those who believed in the city of

Thessalonica. His statement here indicates that he never prayed for them without thanking God for them. Notice that his thanksgiving included all of them. He was not just thankful just for some, but he was thankful for all of them.

As I was thinking about what Paul indicated here, I asked myself some questions that I want to ask you today. I asked myself if I always thank God for the believers that I pray for. I know that you have people that you pray for, just as I do. Usually we are conscious of some special needs, or ongoing needs, in the lives of the people we pray for. But how often as we pray do we preface our prayers by thanking God for His people, and for what He has done in their lives. Are we truly thankful to God for His people? Paul said, "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers."

Secondly, do we really thank God for *all* of the believers we pray for, or for just *some* of them? Paul said that he thanked God for all of them. This means that though people were at different stages of spiritual growth, and some were easier to get along with than others, yet, as he came to the Lord in prayer to intercede for them, he thanked God for all of them. Nobody was excluded from his thanksgiving.

Now notice another thing about prayer here in the second verse where he said, "making mention of you in our prayers." This seems to indicate that as Paul prayed for the church at Thessalonica, as far as it was possible for him to do so, he did not just pray for them as a group, but he made mention of them by name. His prayers, in other words, were very personal. It would be good for all of us to go through our church roster sometime just to thank God for every person, one by one, making mention of their names as we pray.

Then, as we come to verse three, we see the things that brought particular joy to the heart of the Apostle Paul. Notice what he said:

Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope  
in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father.

Notice that here we have those three familiar New Testament words: faith, hope, love. You remember that when Paul was concluding 1 Corinthians 13 he said, "And now abide faith, hope, and love." Paul could relate these words to the church at Thessalonica. This was the reason for his thanksgiving. If you can thank God for people who manifest faith, and love, and hope, you are thanking God for three characteristics which are evidence that God has really done a work in their hearts.

Let's think of that first expression, "your work of faith." When we think of work, we usually think of doing something in the church, maybe teaching a class, or helping clean up the church, getting it ready for Sunday services, or any number of things that have to be done. This is work, and it is the work of the Lord. Or, we think of witnessing, or of something else which could be termed as Christian service. But Paul was not limiting the expression, "your work of faith," to activities such as these. The word that he used here for "work" describes *activity of any kind*. It is really a word which includes everything that goes together to make up your life and mine day after day. Whatever your particular work might be, if it is being an electrician, or selling paint, or serving as a physician, or teaching school, or a housewife, or whatever it may be, Paul was talking about the fact that he knew that there was a new dimension in the lives of these people. Their lives were characterized by a trust in God. That is what a work of faith is. Whatever we do is to be done by faith. When people come to the Lord Jesus Christ, then they see the need for trusting the Lord in every detail of their lives. Life is lived in a different way. We become conscious of God, conscious of our need of Him, conscious of our need of His blessing. As Paul took the Gospel into the city of Thessalonica,

he went in to preach the Gospel to heathen people who were not giving God a thought. But through the grace of God their lives were transformed. Now they went about their work doing the same things, but with a daily confidence and trust in the Lord. That is what makes our lives a work of faith.

Secondly, he added to the first another expression which our translators have accurately translated, "labor of love." This, added to the "work of faith," means that they were motivated by love. "Labor of love" means that what you are doing, you are doing because you are motivated by a love for Him. Paul was indicating here that they were motivated in all that they did by a deep and abiding love for God and for the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says, "I have seen that you work trusting God, but that you also work because you love Him."

Then he mentions a third thing: "Patience of hope."

When we think of patience, we often think of just waiting, like we are waiting on a street corner to meet somebody, or just waiting without doing anything in particular. Sometimes we wait just because we can't do anything else, but we wait impatiently. Often we wait because we are looking for something to happen that we have been hoping would happen. But the word "patience" in our text is a word that is combined by two Greek words which mean *to remain under*. It means that you stay busy. The need for patience usually indicates that there is some kind of a trial that you are going through, but you keep going with real hope in your heart that God will meet your need in His own time for His glory and your good. Since this epistle has so much to say about the coming of the Lord, he may have been indicating here by the use of the word "hope" that he was thinking of the Lord's return. "In the sight of God and our Father" means that all that was going on in their lives was being done in the very presence of God Who is our heavenly Father. Therefore, in spite of their trials, they were continuing to labor on with great hope in their hearts both for the present and for the future. Here on earth we too can continually labor and persevere in doing what God has appointed us to do, knowing that our expectation of blessing is always going to be in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we have this wonderful picture of what was going on in the hearts and lives of the people of Thessalonica. They were not perfect. They had their problems, and I know that they had their problems with each other, just like any other church would. But as Paul thought of them and thought of what God had done, his heart was rejoicing, and so he was giving thanks to God.. He said, in effect, "Every time I come to God in prayer for you, I have to thank God that you are not what you used to be, but that what you are by the grace of God is evident in the way that you live. You work because of your faith, you labor because of your love, and you persevere because you know your labor cannot be in vain in Him."

He concluded this by saying in the fourth verse, " Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God."

I did not put that there. Paul put it there. The elect are not marked in any way before they are saved. We do not know when we go out into the world and have the opportunity to talk to a neighbor, or somebody we work with, or a relative, or whoever it may be, possibly just a casual acquaintance—we have no way of knowing if they are chosen of God. Paul did not know when he went into the city of Thessalonica, he had no way of telling, how the Gospel would be received. But one by one people professed faith in Christ. And Paul knew they were saved by the faith, love, and hope that he had observed in their lives. He had seen in their lives that which had convinced him that they had been chosen of God.

We will learn when we get into the second epistle that when Paul talked about the election of God, he was not talking about something that was taking place as he preached the Gospel to them. No. When he wrote about the election of God, he had in mind what God determined before the foundation of the world. God not only planned that He was going to save sinners, but in His infinite wisdom and His infinite grace He chose those who were going to be saved. He determined that they would be saved. Then, as the Gospel was preached, and people were brought to Christ, Paul was able to see a part of what God had ordained before the foundation of the world. See 2 Thessalonians 2:13 and Ephesians 1:3-4.

You see, if you understand election and what election means to the people of God, it is going to increase your prayer life. That is what he was saying here. This is why he thanked God. God had sovereignly chosen in pure grace all who were being saved. He did not choose them because He saw something good in them, because all of our righteousnesses are as filthy rags. He did not choose us because He knew that we would be receptive to the Gospel, because we would never have received Christ if the Holy Spirit had not convicted us of our sin. God does not see any good in any of us. We are totally useless and unprofitable to God. But He, by the miracle of His grace and for reasons known only to Himself, has chosen those who are being saved. And all of the glory and all of the praise for their salvation belongs to God and to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So our understanding of the doctrine of election is going to have a direct bearing upon the frequency and the depth of our thanksgiving to God as we pray for each other. If we reject that truth, we have to give some of the credit for man's salvation to man. Therefore, you have to give some thanksgiving to man. But if you see that God chooses, and God calls, and God saves, and God keeps, and God glorifies, then we will see how that even by praising God day by day we can never really give Him all of the thanks-giving which He alone deserves for the salvation of His people. Salvation is of God from start to finish. Paul saw in the lives of people the proof, the God-given proof, that they had really been transformed by the Gospel.

### Conclusion

Now, let me close by just pointing out two more very simple but precious truths which are in our text.

You notice that three times in these verses Paul spoke of God as either "the Father" or as "our Father." You have it in verse 1. He spoke of "the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father." Then he said at the end of verse 1, "Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father." At the end of verse 3 he used those encouraging words, "in the sight of God and our Father." You can see also that three times Paul referred to the Lord Jesus Christ.

I love to hear people say, "Lord Jesus Christ," don't you? I love to hear His name. Look at what Paul said. He addressed the church "which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ -- not just "Lord," nor just as "Jesus," nor just as "Christ," but as "the Lord Jesus Christ." Also, "Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." Then, at the end of verse three: "Patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." So he said either "the Father," or "our Father," and he said either "the Lord Jesus Christ" or "our Lord Jesus Christ" three times each!

Let me remind you as we close: What a wonderful thing it is to be able to address the God of heaven and earth as "our Father," and to address the Lord Jesus Christ as "our Lord Jesus Christ." He is my Father. He

is your Father. He is my Lord Jesus Christ. He is your Lord Jesus Christ, if you know Him as your Savior. Let's be thankful that we have a relationship to God in which we can speak of Him as "our Father," and we have a relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ in which we can speak of Him as "our Lord Jesus Christ." You see, God belongs to us. We belong to Him, to be sure, but He belongs to us. And the Lord Jesus Christ belongs to us. I do not think that you would have this in the Word of God if God and the Lord Jesus Christ were not delighted in the fact that we have this relationship with Them. And They love to hear us recognize in prayer that we do.

Remember when your children were small and you had a contest with your wife, or with your husband, as to whether or not your children were going to say "Daddy" or "Mama" first? And what a time of excitement it was when those words came first from their lips? Think what it means to God when being transformed by the grace of God you come to the Father and you say, "*My* Father, I come to You in the name of *my* Lord Jesus Christ." That is what Paul would have us learn here.

Therefore, what a lot of wonderful teaching there is here in this prayer. Let us praise Him continually so that later on we will not regret that we have failed to praise Him the way we should. Robert Murray McCheyne wrote these wonderful words:

Chosen not for good in me,  
Wakened up from wrath to flee,  
Hidden in the Savior's side,  
By the Spirit sanctified,—  
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show,  
By my love, how much I owe.

Let us bow in prayer.

Father, may the Holy Spirit use these words of the Apostle Paul's prayers in our own hearts that we might pray more, and pray like your servant, the Apostle Paul, prayed. May we give You, day by day, the thanksgiving that You so rightly deserve for all that we have in Christ. In His name we pray. Amen.