

A PRAYER FOR PERFECTED FAITH

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Thus far in our studies of *The Prayers of the Apostle Paul*, we looked first at Paul as a man of prayer. Then we have considered two of the Apostle Paul's prayers. They have both been prayers of thanks-giving. If you have your Bible open to 1 Thessalonians, you will see the first prayer in chapter 1, verses 2 through 4. The second prayer is in chapter 2, verse 13, where Paul again was thanking God for their reception of the Word of God. Today we come to the third prayer which is in chapter 3, beginning with verse 9. For the third time in this epistle Paul indicated that he was giving thanks to God. Actually, there are three kinds of prayer in this third prayer. He began with thanksgiving, then he prayed concerning himself and his co-workers, Silas and Timothy, that they might be able to get back to Thessalonica, and might perfect what was lacking in their faith. Then in the last three verses of chapter three he interceded for the Thessalonians.

Let me begin reading with verse 9 and on down to the end of the chapter so that we can all have this prayer fresh in our minds.

9 For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sake before our God;

10 Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith?

11 Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you.

12 And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you:

13 To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

One thing that the epistles of Paul show us is that he was a tireless servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. It seems that he would spare no effort whatever in carrying the Gospel to people wherever they might be, but it was his special burden—and I think we could say that it was his special calling—to preach the Gospel where Christ had never been preached. Nothing delighted his soul more than to tell people about Christ who had never heard of Him. You remember that he expressed this when he wrote to the church at Rome and was explaining to them why he had not been able to get to them. He said in Romans 15:20, "Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation." That was his unique calling, and God used him in an amazing way all through the Roman Empire.

This was not all that he did. After the Gospel entered a city, and people were saved, and a church was established, we see from passages like this before us that he longed to get back to them to help them in their

walk with the Lord. This was the case with the Thessalonian believers. He had been there for approximately three weeks. He had been forced to leave town because of the persecution, but he longed to get back to them. As he expressed here, his purpose was "to perfect that which was lacking in their faith."

It is important to see that as Paul labored from place to place he never took credit for the work that he did. He knew that God was the One Who was actually doing the work. So to God he was continually giving thanks. Thus we see here, as in the two previous prayers, that thanksgiving is prominent. All of this is consistent with what the Apostle Paul said in chapter 5 of this epistle when he said, "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (1 Thess. 5:18).

We give thanks to God when we recognize His hand in every blessing that we receive. I agree with those who say that if we started now and spent the rest of our lives doing nothing but thanking God, we would never get caught up with all of the thanksgiving that we ought to give to Him. So it is important for us to see that this is not only an obligation that we have to God, but it is the will of God. It seems that nothing really pleases the Lord any more than for us to recognize the good things that He does for us day by day, and then to come to Him and offer to Him the sacrifice of our praise.

There are many Old Testament passages which emphasize the importance of praising God. Asaph, who has written some of the Psalms, said in Psalm 50:23, speaking on God's behalf, "Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God."

When we take seriously our responsibility to praise God, we are doing that which pleases Him. But, as our text suggests, we run into a kind of problem which Paul expressed as a question here in verse 9. Let me read this for you again. Some versions, instead of putting the question mark at the end of verse 10, put it at the end of verse 9. I think probably that is a little more accurate. There is no punctuation in the original, so it was just purely a matter of choice on the part of the translators. But this is the question he raised: "What thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God?" This is what we can call Paul's dilemma.

I. PAUL'S DILEMMA (1 Thess. 3:9).

The idea in verse 9 is this: God has blessed us. You will notice that he is speaking in the first person plural: "For what thanks"—not just can *I* render to God, but—"for what thanks can we render to God again for you." If you look at the first verse of the epistle, you will see that Sylvanus, who is Silas, and Timotheus, who is Timothy, were his companions. So we can assume that when he said, "For what thanks can we," he means, *For what thanks can Silas and Timothy and I render to You for all of the blessings that You have given us?* The idea in the question that he raised here is, "How can we possibly return to God in full the praise which He so richly deserves for the blessings that He has given to us?"

The New International Version translates it this way: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?" Here, if you will think of a balance scale in which we are seeking to measure God's blessings, on one side, and our thanksgiving, on the other side. Paul was thinking in terms of how much praise and what kind of praise it would take to balance the scales so that the praise would be equal to the blessings that God has given.

Haven't you felt that way, even if you were trying to thank some person for doing something good that they

have done for you? I do not know how many times during my life I have written a letter to thank somebody for what they had done for me, or for what they had given to me, and I have started out by saying something like this: "I really cannot find the right words to express the gratitude that I feel in my heart for what you have done for me." We just grope for words, don't we, to try to find the right words that will adequately express the gratitude that is in our hearts. When Paul thought about his ministry and the tremendous work that God had done in the hearts of those Thessalonians, he was groping for words that would adequately express how deeply thankful he was for what God had done. This is how he felt about thanking the Lord. We have often felt that way too if thanksgiving means what it needs to mean to us..

With what words could we adequately express the thanksgiving that is due to God because of all the blessings that He has poured out upon us, not just in initially saving us, but in the way He has kept us, and guided us, for the times He has restrained us, and how He has blessed us when we have not deserved His blessing? How can we thank Him for all that He has taught us and for all of the fellowship that He has given us with Himself? I could go on mentioning blessing after blessing after blessing. Paul felt this way, that he had never really thanked God as he should have thanked Him.

One amazing thing about the Lord's work is that He often chooses to work through us. Paul had seen this time and time again as he went from one place to another. What we need to remember is that, since He does the work, He deserves all of the glory. We are simply instruments in His hands. So Paul was grasping for words when he tried to tell God how thankful he was for what He had done in the hearts of the people there in the city of Thessalonica. When he said "we," he apparently meant that Silas and Timothy were having the same kind of trouble feeling that they had not praised God adequately for the blessings that God had given. They were overjoyed at the work that God had done, but their chief dilemma—and I do not think that we can express it in any other way—was finding words to thank God sufficiently. It would be wonderful if we all felt that way about the thanksgiving that we owe to the Lord.

In verse 10 we see how he was praying for himself.

II. PAUL'S PETITION (1 Thess. 3:10).

I use the word "petition" here in contrast with the word "intercession." It takes a different word to describe what we are doing when we pray for ourselves as compared with what we are doing when we pray for others. Here Paul was praying for himself, and I am calling that kind of prayer, *petition*. This is what we have in verse 10: "Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith?"

William Hendriksen said in his commentary on this verse:

But even though Paul is still struggling with the problem of how to make adequate return for blessings already received, this does not deter him from asking for still more (Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, I and II Thessalonians*, p. 89).

That is the way we are, isn't it? And that is the way God wants us to be. We are behind in our thanksgiving. We know that we cannot express our thanksgiving adequately to the Lord. And yet we move from our faltering thanksgiving to asking Him for greater blessings.

When he said here, "Night and day praying exceedingly," He did not only mean morning and evening, but he meant that this was a burden which was continually resting upon him. He was lifting his heart to God

during his waking hours, praying that he might get back to them again to perfect their faith.

The word that he used for "praying" here is different from the normal word for prayer. It suggests that he was pleading with God; actually *begging* would be a good translation. They had only been there three weeks. They had seen God do a wonderful work in the hearts of those Thessalonians who had trusted Christ, but Paul and his co-workers wanted to see more blessing. And this is why they wanted to get back with the people. So Paul said, "praying exceedingly," which means *with great fervency*, that they might again be with those believers to help them grow in the Lord even more. So with all of the things that Paul and Silas and Timothy were doing in other places, this was a burden that they were continually expressing to the Lord. We can see how vital this was to their joy by what Paul had written in the eighth verse of this chapter, the verse just before my text, when he said, "For now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord." When you lead people to Christ, and then see them going on with the Lord, you realize that what brings added spiritual blessing to them, brings joy to you. This is how Paul felt about those Thessalonian believers.

Paul and Silas and Timothy were not the kind of men who could go to a certain place, preach the Gospel, see people saved, then move on to some other place, and never give any thought to what had taken place in the previous place. Whenever they were used to bring people to Christ, they continued to pray for them, and they also looked forward to getting back to them again.

Why did they want to get back to Thessalonica? It was that they "might perfect that which was lacking in their faith."

What did he mean by "their faith?" This is an expression which includes everything that had to do with their relationship with God and their walk with the Lord. Let me suggest three things for sure that it meant.

First, it meant that he was concerned that they would come to a greater understanding of the truth of God. God had done a great work in the hearts of these Thessalonian believers, but they needed teaching. So he wanted to get back to them and give them further instruction in the Word of God. He felt that it was necessary to do it face to face.

Secondly, he was concerned about their obedience to God. This was a part of their faith. They needed both to understand what the will of God was, and then to do what God wanted them to do. Paul was concerned about this because he knew that the continuation of the blessing was to a great extent dependent upon how obedient they were to the will of God.

Then finally, they needed to be encouraged to trust the Lord. After all, we walk by faith, not by sight. We all need to trust the Lord more than we do. And that was a need which Paul knew was present in the hearts of those Thessalonian believers. Our faith is exercised when we pray, and then wait upon the Lord for the answer. We trust the Lord to meet our needs. We trust the Lord for guidance. It is evident that they were trusting the Lord, but Paul wanted to see them trusting Him even more.

No church, including the church at Thessalonica, with all of the blessings that they had received, is doing so well but what it can do better. No believer is walking so faithfully in fellowship with God but what his fellowship can be better. That applies to every one of us. We all need to improve. We all need to grow in our faith. We all need to know the Word of God better. We all need to be more obedient to the Word. We all need to trust the Lord more than we do. Where Paul saw that God was blessing, he prayed for greater

blessing. This is the way it should be with all of us. The Lord's work will not be finished in any of us until we get to heaven, until the Lord calls us home, or until the Lord Jesus returns for all of us. So our faith needs to be perfected more and more until that day arrives. We always need to keep growing, don't we? It seems from what the Apostle Paul said here, that he sought to make every contact with the Lord's people to count for their edification, whether it was writing to them or actually being with them.

Now we come to the third and final point in our text.

III. PAUL'S REQUESTS FOR THE CHURCH (1 Thess. 3:11-13).

The eleventh verse actually has to do with the church as much as it did for Paul and Silas and Timothy. As much as Paul wanted to get back to them, he only wanted to go when it was God's time for him to go. He was indicating here that there was a right time for the Thessalonians just as there was a right time for himself, and he was trusting the Lord to lead him to go when it was right both for Paul and his fellowservants, as well as for the church. The Lord's work needs to be done in His way, and at His time. And so he prayed, "Now God himself, even our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you."

With all that Paul knew about the Lord, and with all of his experience as a servant of the Lord, there was always a great simplicity about his faith. Just think, he believed that God was interested not only in the spiritual growth of the believers in Thessalonica, but that God was interested in the very time that he ought to go back to see those people again! As much as Paul wanted to get back to that city, he did not want to go until the Lord's time was right for him to go. Paul teaches us by his prayer that it is not only good to do the right thing, but it is equally important for us to do it in the right time. His guidance in our lives is for our own edification. It was for Paul and Silas and Timothy to be growing through this time of waiting and praying as they waited for the Lord to make His will clear to them. They were not just going to drop everything and go. That might have been what they wanted to do. No, they were fervently praying that they might get back to Thessalonica, but it was their desire that God and Christ would "direct" them as to when they should go.

This verb "direct" includes the removal of the obstacles which stood in the way. It meant to straighten out the difficulties that seemed to be hindering them from going. As I studied this word, it reminded me of the ministry of John the Baptist who was preparing the way for the Lord Jesus Christ, going before, seeing that things were taken care of ahead of time. Here is Paul calling upon the God of heaven and earth, and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to clear the way for them to have another time of ministry in Thessalonica. I think that is a very, very wonderful thing. As I have already said, the Lord's work needs to be done not only in His way, but in His time.

Let us remember that what Paul was appealing for here, is important also for us today. God has a time for us to speak, and so He removes the obstacles and He prepares hearts. It is wonderful to see that all of this is under His control. That is the reason we thank Him when we see Him opening doors, when we see Him causing people to be receptive to the truth, and responsive to the truth.

But let us move on to the next verses. Verses 12 and 13 give us the main request in Paul's prayer. Let me read these verses for you.

12 And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you:

13 To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints" (1 Thessalonians 3:12-13).

If you look on into chapter 4, you will see that Paul talked about this love that believers have for each other. In 4:9 and 10 notice what he said:

9 But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another.

10 And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more.

It is apparent that the Apostle Paul's emphasis in these verses continued to be the same as in our text in chapter 3. They loved each other. God had taught them to love each other. But he wanted them to love each other "more and more."

Going back to our text in 3:12 it is easy to see that the emphasis is on growth, or on increasing in the good that they were doing. He wanted them "to increase and abound in love one toward another . . ."

The Greek is very interesting, very emphatic, at the beginning of verse 12. And it contrasts the point Paul was making in 2:11 with 2:12. After praying that the Lord would "direct" their way to Thessalonica, then the emphasis at the beginning of verse 12 is, "But as for you . . ." When he wrote of his request for them, he made it in contrast with his prayer for himself. We might translate it this way: "As far as we are concerned, God himself and the Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you, *but as for you*, the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men." Or we could paraphrase it this way: "Our prayer is that we will be able to come, that God will remove every obstacle, that God will prepare your hearts, and lead us to you. But, as for you, whether we get there or not, we are praying that the Lord will make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you."

He used these two words, "increase and abound," and grammarians have had a little difficulty trying to distinguish between them." But it is something like taking a cup and pouring coffee or some liquid into the cup. You keep pouring and pouring and all of a sudden the liquid overflows the cup and it is running down into the saucer. This is what he had in mind: *The Lord cause you to increase in your love for each other so that your love is overflowing.* This is not something that we are capable of doing for ourselves. That is why Paul prayed about it. It is a work of God.

When he said, "toward all men," I do not think that he was referring to the people in the world because he had been referring to the love that believers in Christ have for each other. So "all men," or all people, would be a reference to the people of God wherever they might be. In the verses we have looked at in chapter 4, he spoke of "all the brethren which are in all Macedonia." Thessalonica was located in Macedonia. So in referring to "all men," he must have meant that their love was not limited to just the church at Thessalonica, but that wherever they would come upon the people of God, the Thessalonians should extend their love to them.

When the Lord was with His disciples just before He went to the Cross, you remember that He said to them, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34-35). What was new about that commandment? It was this: "As I have loved you." We are to love each other the way the Lord Jesus Christ loves us. He alone is sufficient for this. This is what makes the

fellowship of the Lord's people so precious and unique. Paul was indicating here that whenever you have a church where the people are bound together in love, and where their love is not only growing, but overflowing, you are not going to have any trouble convincing people on the outside that they are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is one of the greatest avenues of testimony that we have to the world. The world talks about love, and there are some wonderful illustrations of love in the world, but the love that God has shed abroad in our hearts, which we manifest toward each other, is absolutely unique. There is nothing in the world like it. We have this high calling, and what God calls upon us to do, He is certainly prepared to see that it is realized in our lives.

Not only does the world recognize that we are the people of God by our love for each other, but it is this love which gives us assurance that we are really saved. The Apostle John, in his first epistle, said, "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death" (1 John 3:14). You see, if you do not enjoy being with the people of God, you had better examine your heart to make sure that you are really saved. Paul was discussing here a very, very important truth. And so it needs to be very important to each of us.

Now, why was Paul so concerned about the love that the Thessalonian believers needed to show for each other? We have the answer in verse 13: "To the end . . ." – this is the purpose – "to the end He may stablish (a Greek word which means *to strengthen*) your hearts unblameable in holiness (not just before the church, but) before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints."

Paul was saying that the Lord was coming, but he did not know when. However, he meant that this is something that we need to be concerned about until the Lord does come. Here we are two thousand years later and we are still waiting for the Lord to come. We firmly believe, don't we, that He is going to come. But, until He does, we need to guard our relationship with each other because it is through this love that we experience in our fellowship, one with another, that we will make progress toward being established unblameable in holiness in God's sight.

What does this tell you? It is very interesting, isn't it, to see love and holiness put together. Love for each other is to be "unblameable," that is, *unchargeable*. This means that we do not have any charge against us. We are irreproachable in God's sight. It indicates that you and I will never meet a truly holy person who is not a loving person, who does not have in his heart a great love for the people of God. Paul would seem to suggest here by His prayer that the more loving we are with each other, the more holy we are going to be in the sight of God. Don't ask me how that happens; it just happens. We are strengthened by this. So, when the Lord comes, if He should come today, He should find us with our hearts really bound together in love, and that our love is not only growing, but our love is overflowing, not only among ourselves, but to all of the Lord's people wherever they may be.

Conclusion

I hope that as we have looked at this combined emphasis upon love and holiness, we will not be satisfied with the progress that we have made thus far, but that it will be upon our hearts that our love for each other would "increase and abound." We can thank the Lord for the fellowship that we enjoy, but it can always be better. And the Lord can make it better as you and I seek that our love may increase and abound, like a cup that is not only full, *but running over!* How different we would be, how much better our fellowship with each other would be, and how much more powerful our witness to the world would be, if we have a growing

and abounding love for one another.