

A PLEA FOR THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S GOODNESS

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Please take your Bibles and turn to 2 Thessalonians, chapter 1.

We began looking at the prayers of the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians, which was probably the first epistle that he wrote which were to be a part of the Word of God. After looking at those prayers, we are moving on today into 2 Thessalonians. The prayer that we will be considering is found at the end of chapter one. Actually, there is a prayer of thanksgiving, or an expression of Paul's thanksgiving, in verse three, but I am not going to deal with that today. I simply want to point out to you that it seems that the Lord had continued to answer Paul's prayer for the church at Thessalonica and for that Paul was expressing his thanksgiving to God for His faithfulness.

Estimates vary as to the time between the writing of 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians, but it varies usually within a year, some say just a few weeks. But it was not very long after Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians that he wrote 2 Thessalonians. As he wrote to them, he said in verse three, "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth." So their faith was growing and their love was abounding, and Paul felt a deep obligation in his heart to express his thanksgiving to the Lord because he was the only One Who could have prospered the work in the way that it was going.

The fourth verse of this first chapter of 2 Thessalonians indicates that they were still having trouble. There were persecutions. There were tribulations. So Paul was writing to encourage them in the face of all the difficulties that they had. As you look down through this passage, you can see that he was writing to assure them that when the Lord returned, He was going to do two things. He was going to judge those who do not know Him. The judgment he mentioned is in verses 8 and 9:

8 In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

9 Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction, from the presence of the Lord, and form the glory of his power.

So He was going to judge those who do not know God. But verse 10, which just precedes the prayer, tells us that something else is going to happen. It is that the Lord is coming to be glorified in His saints, in His people, as He brings things to a climax. It was for this that God was preparing them.

The first word of the prayer in verse 11, as you can see, is the word "wherefore" (if you are using the King

James Version). This shows that the first ten verses prompted the prayer that is recorded for us in verses 11 and 12. The words he used to introduce the prayer show the importance of prayer itself, but especially of this particular prayer. "Wherefore also we pray always for you . . ." In light of the testings and trials that they were facing, and in the view of what the Lord was going to do when He returns in glory, he said,

11 Wherefore we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power:

12 That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

That prayer might not mean a great deal to you when you read it through the first time, but I hope by the time we are finished this morning you will see that there is a lot of spiritual meat in his prayer. He sets a pattern here for all of us to follow.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS PRAYER (2 Thess. 1:11a).

The word "always" points out the importance of this particular prayer. Our prayers for people may vary from day to day. But if there is something that we pray for certain people all the time, or certain things that we pray for all the people all of the time, this means that we are convicted that the petitions we bring to the Lord are extremely important. We do not let a day go by without mentioning this particular request. This ought to attract our attention. This was a young church, just a matter of months old at the most. God was blessing in a most wonderful way. They were facing a lot of opposition and difficulty in the city from people who did not know the Lord. Because of all that was going on in that city, he wrote to them to tell them that he was praying always for them, consistently remembering this request.

As we consider this prayer, we will find that it goes beyond just the local situation in Thessalonica. It has an application to the Lord's people in every generation. Therefore, we need to consider making this prayer a part of our prayers as we pray for each other. You have been encouraged many, many times to use your church roster as a prayer list. So, as we come to these prayers in Paul's epistles, let us examine our own prayers to see if the way Paul was praying for the people who were upon his heart is the way we pray for each other. I am sure that this is one reason that the Holy Spirit led Paul not only to pray for people as he did, but to record his prayers in his epistles. They are a lesson, an example to us, a pattern for us to follow. The Holy Spirit was not only telling us how Paul prayed, but He was indicating how we need to pray if we are going to deal with the issues of abiding importance to the people of God every day and in every generation.

Now let me ask a simple question: Why do we pray? I am thinking of intercessory prayer.

There are several reasons. We pray because we realize that we cannot do for people what needs to be done for them. We also pray for people because we know that they cannot do for themselves what needs to be done. We address our prayers to God because He is the only One Who can do what they need, as well as what we need. Paul was certainly not suggesting in this prayer that the people of Thessalonica needed this kind of blessing, but that he did not need it. That was not his purpose at all. They needed it. He needed it. But he was writing to them, and thinking about them. He wanted them to know that when he prayed for them, this burden was always upon his heart. The word "always" seems to suggest that what Paul was asking God to do was something that was not going to be a once-for-all answer. If he always prayed this prayer when he prayed for the believers at Thessalonica, then this suggests to us, does it not, that this was a continuing need that they had. This was something that would not be finished until the Lord would return,

or until He would take them to heaven through death.

Notice also he said "we pray always for you," not just "I pray always for you." The first verse of this epistle, like the first verse of 1 Thessalonians, tells us that Silas and Timothy were with him. So we can assume that these two men were carrying the same burden for the ministry in Thessalonica that Paul was carrying.

But now let us turn our attention to:

II. THE REQUEST (2 Thess. 1:11b).

In order that we all may get the full impact of this request, let me re-read the first part of our text.

Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power.

Be sure to get these details firmly fixed in your mind. Now what was his request? What was his burden for the church at Thessalonica? It was ". . . that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power."

When we look at that request, the first thing that we need to understand if the rest of it is to make any sense, is, what did he have in mind when he said, "this calling"?

I think that most of you know the New Testament well enough to know that when he wrote about our calling, especially when the subject was salvation, he had in mind *our calling to salvation*. He had been writing about what God has done to the bring the people in Thessalonica to Himself. So he was thinking about salvation. But he had in mind the full scope of salvation, and particularly in terms of what the Lord had been doing now and had been doing since the day they had been saved. He had been preparing them to be glorified when He comes. This is the ultimate purpose of His calling. He is coming to be glorified in His saints.

Notice that there are two times in verse 10, the verse just before Paul's prayer, that the Apostle Paul used the word "in." That is a very, very important little preposition. "When He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be admired in all them that believe . . ." (v. 10). Some of you may have a more recent translation which changes the second "in" to *among*, but in the original language it is "in" in both places. He did not say, *When He shall come to be glorified by His saints, and to be admired by all them that believe*. I am sure that that is going to take place. We are going to praise Him as our Savior and as our Redeemer. But here he had in mind something that is taking place *in* us. "He shall be glorified in his saints, and be admired in all them that believe . . ." So then he continued,

Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power (2 Thess. 1:11).

I repeat: Paul was not talking about something that we are going to do by way of verbally praising the Lord when He comes (although that will certainly take place), but he was referring to the work that is done in our hearts by which you and I, in our very beings, are going to bring glory and honor and praise to our Lord. You can see this very clearly in 2 Thess. 2:14.

We see in 2 Timothy 1:9 that Paul was talking about our salvation when he spoke of God

Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.

God's purpose in calling us to Himself and saving us is that we would be glorified, that we would be changed into the very likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

In the light of what I have said, what person, what child of God, in his right mind would ever think that he is capable of making himself like the Lord? As you think about yourself, and as I think about myself, we can see so many ways that we are not like the Lord. I want to be like Him. You want to be like Him. That is the purpose that the Lord had in mind in saving us. But none of us here this morning who understands the sinfulness of our own hearts, would ever assume that we can make ourselves like the Lord wants us to be. We know that the Lord has to do this. He works in our hearts. It is beyond what we can do for ourselves. This is why Paul was pleading with God for the believers in Thessalonica. Only God can make us like Christ. Surely we would all agree to that.

What did he mean, then, when he said, "That our God would count you worthy of this calling"? Surely he did not mean that even in our saved state we are worthy of being like the Lord Jesus Christ. No, he certainly did not mean that. He meant that this is our calling, that the Lord Jesus is going to be glorified in us. When he was praying that we would be worthy of that, he meant that God would so work in us that we would measure up in our character and in our lives to this grand and glorious purpose that the Lord has in saving us. You see, He did not save us just to take us to heaven, as I have said to you many times. He saved us to make us like Christ, to change us. It is God Who is going to make us worthy. He is the One Who is going to work in our hearts. He is going to bring about this transformation. The more we understand what we are without Christ, what we were before we came to know the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, the more we marvel at God's grace, do we not? We marvel that He would ever have anything to do with us. Then, since we have been saved, we have failed Him so many times. We can be hot and we can be cold in our zeal, but the Lord continues to work in us.

It was Paul's burden as he wrote to these people who were in tribulation and suffering persecution that God would use even all of those circumstances to fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness. I think this could easily be a definition of salvation. *Salvation is the good pleasure of the goodness of God as it is worked out in the lives of the Lord's people.* We do not have anything that could commend us to God. God loves us in spite of what we are. When Paul wrote about "the good pleasure of His goodness," he was indicating that this is the thing that God delights to do.

I know that it is not possible for the Lord to get discouraged. But I often feel that if I were in the Lord's place, I would get tired of us. But when the Lord works with us, He is very patient with us. We move ahead and then we move back. Our spiritual history has its ups and downs, and sometimes more down than up. Are you not amazed that the Lord does not get tired of us? But when Paul said that it is "the good pleasure of his goodness," he meant that there is nothing that God delights more in doing than in what He has to do to make us like the Lord Jesus Christ. It is amazing. It is amazing to see the significance of this request which Paul continually brought to the Lord. This is what God delights to do. When we were first saved, this work began. And it continues as long as we are in this life. It is the manifestation of His sovereign goodness that He works in our lives to make us like the Lord Jesus Christ.

This expression, according to the meaning of the Greek words that Paul used in this prayer, suggests that

nothing less than what God has done for us in saving us could possibly satisfy Him. He sent His own dear Son to bear our sins in His own body on the tree. Therefore, this is the thing that He delights to do. Paul was praying that He would fulfil it, that He would complete it. It is wonderful to see what God has planned for us in salvation. This is what Paul was talking about when he wrote to the Philippian church:

Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

When the Lord saves us, He starts a work that He is going to continue until that work is completed in the day of Jesus Christ. It is wonderful, isn't it? Nothing is more wonderful than the salvation that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But now this raises a question for us: If God is sovereign, and He had in mind our transformation into the likeness of Christ even before He saved us, then why do we need to pray about it? I doubt if any of us knows the full answer to that question, but let me suggest some answers.

First, we pray about it in recognition that we know that this is God's purpose in saving us. It may be that you were saved for some time before you realized why you were saved. Maybe you were so impressed with the fact that God was saving you from eternal judgment (and He certainly was doing that), and that He was forgiving you of your sins, that it may have been some time--it was in my case--before you learned that His main reason in saving you was to transform you into the very likeness of the Lord Jesus. I have told you before, and you know this, that we are not going to become gods. We are not going to be Deity like the Lord Jesus. There are many things about this that we do not understand. Even when the Apostle John said that "we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is," he also said that "it doth not yet appear what we shall be." He meant that he did not fully understand himself all that was involved in our becoming like the Lord Jesus Christ. He could not explain it in every detail. So there are still some aspects of this grand and glorious truth which we do not understand fully, but we firmly believe that God is doing this in each one of us.

Secondly, we pray also, like the Apostle Paul did in our text, to indicate that we want to be submissive to the Lord in this work that He is doing. Sometimes He uses measures that we do not like to make us more like Christ. Our trials and testings are instruments that God uses to fashion us more and more into the likeness of the Lord Jesus. Remember that it is said in Scripture that even He, our Lord, learned obedience by the things which He suffered. See Hebrews 5:8-9.

Third, we also pray about this to indicate also that this is what we want. The masses of people in the world, if you talk to them about becoming like the Lord Jesus Christ, would laugh at you. They are not interested in being like Him. They do not want to be like Him. They do not want to have anything to do with Him. But when you talk to the people of God about this, it is something that is entirely different. This is what we want, and we really want it just as quickly as we can get it, don't we? We are thankful for everything that God has done in our lives to change us from what we used to be, to make us more like our Lord Jesus Christ.

After I have said everything that I have said about God working and addressing this request to God, does this mean that we have no responsibility in all of this?

Look at verse 11 again. Paul said, "that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power."

When you run across that word "faith" in Scripture, we should remember that our faith is a gift from God. We would never have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ for our salvation if God had not given us the gift of faith. God continues to give us our faith. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Author and Finisher of our faith (Heb.12:2). Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). God gave us the faith that was necessary for our salvation. But our perfection, our growth in grace, our transformation into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ, comes as we continue to trust the Lord. We walk by faith, don't we? That is one reason, I think, I enjoyed Jerry Bridges' book, *Trusting God*, so much. That is the one matter that we need to be concerned about. Every day that we live we need to be trusting Him, depending upon Him, even when we do not understand what He is doing. At times when it seems that He is not even paying any attention to us, we need to be trusting Him. This is "the work of faith." We are responsible to keep trusting the Lord, but the faith to do so also comes from the Lord.

As Paul prayed, he was not only praying about what God was doing on behalf of the people of God, conforming them to the likeness of the Lord Jesus, but he was also remembering that our response needs to be a response of "faith with power" as we learn to trust the Lord Himself more and more. We trust Him in our times of testing. We trust Him to make us what He wants us to be. All through our lives we learn to trust Him more and more. We often fail to trust Him as we should. That is one reason we pray. We pray for faith. We ask God to help us to trust Him even when we do not understand what He is doing. We trust Him even when it seems that He is purposely withholding blessings from us. So this work of salvation, while being a work of God, is not a work in which we do not have any part. Yet the part that we have is a part which God enables us to have as a result of the faith that He gives us. We are looking daily to the Lord for the faith that we need every day just to trust Him, just to walk with Him, to know that He loves us too much to harm us. He is too wise ever to make a mistake, and He is too powerful ever to fail. In every one of our lives the Lord is working not only to make us like the Lord Jesus Christ, but along with that He is strengthening our "faith with power"—"with power." The only way that you and I can ever hope to measure up to God's purpose in saving us is for Him to make us worthy because of what He is doing in us and for us.

All this leads to the final verse of the prayer, verse 12:

III. THE RESULT (2 Thess. 1:12).

That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 1:12).

This is the result of what Paul was praying that God would do. The word "that" means *that it may come to pass, that it might be possible*. If God does not do it, it is not going to be done. The purpose of our salvation is so high that we cannot possibly reach it without Him. "That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you," again, not *by* you, primarily, but "in you." This places the emphasis upon what we are becoming, what God is doing in our hearts.

The biggest need that we have is the need within us. We commit all the sins that we commit because of the sin that is in us. We need God to do a work in us. This is what the Apostle Paul was talking about here, so "that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ might be glorified."

Leon Morris made this helpful comment on the expression "in the name" in his commentary, *The Epistles*

of Paul to the Thessalonian church. He said,

The name in Biblical times was much more than a means of distinguishing one person from another. It summed up the whole character of a person (p. 21).

Then, in a footnote he quoted another man, G. B. Gray, who said,

A person's name in the Bible was almost an equivalent of his personality, of his character, of the nature of the person. Consequently, when a writer wishes to express forcibly the nature of a person, he says that he will be called so-and-so, or his name will be so-and-so (*Ibid.*)

So, when you relate this to the Lord Jesus Christ, the name of our Lord Jesus Christ speaks of all that the Lord Jesus Christ is. This speaks of His holy character. This speaks of His divine nature. There never has been and there never will be another person like the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the greatest One Who ever walked the face of the earth. So you see, the emphasis again is upon this little preposition "in." We are going to glorify Him with our voices and with our praise, but this is not what Paul was really praying about. He is praying "that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you." Paul was reveling in the fact that, as God was working in the hearts of these Thessalonian believers, they were being changed from the sinful pagans that they had been, who delighted in sin and really had no use for God, into new creatures in Christ. A great transformation had taking place. If you saw them when they received this letter which we call 2 Thessalonians, and you compared it with what they were when they first came to know the Lord Jesus Christ, you would hardly believe that they were the same people. They looked the same, but they talked differently. They were interested in different things. God now had a major part in their lives. They were convicted about things in their lives that were not in keeping with the character of the Lord Jesus Christ. This wonderful preposition "in" that is used through the epistles is the secret of it all. God was doing a work in their hearts.

Many of you are reading, or have read, Jerry Bridges' new book, The Discipline of Grace. He quotes Sinclair Ferguson, who was born and raised in Scotland, but he has been in our country for many years ministering the Word in many place. He said concerning this little preposition *in*, "in Christ," that "this is a doctrine which lies at the very heart of the Christian life" (p. 65). Jerry also quoted John Stott of England, who said in one of his books that "these three expressions, "in Christ," "in Him," and "in the Lord," are found "no less than 164 times in Paul's letters" (*Ibid.*). We do not really know a great deal about the Christian life until we begin to notice that little word "in." Christ is in us, and we are in Christ.

The Lord Jesus was really the first One to talk about that when He spoke about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. He said, "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him" (John 6:56). When the Lord was with His disciples at the last, He said to them,

4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

5 I am the vine ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing (John 15:4-5).

The Apostle Paul said in Galatians 2:20 that Christ was living in him. This is what that verse teaches us: I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

Paul, in Colossians 1:27, said, "...Christ in you, the hope of glory." What amazing truth this is! It is the

truth of our union with the Lord Jesus Christ. This is something that we cannot really explain. This is something that we simply need to know and to believe, that when we trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, He came to dwell in us, and we dwell in Him. This relationship is never going to be broken. People cannot really tell just by looking at us that we are Christians. But the day is coming when they will be able to. When the Lord Jesus Christ completes His work in us, there is not going to be any question but that we belong to Him. We will be like Him. When the Lord comes in glory, His glory is going to be seen in us, and we will be glorified in Him. We cannot begin to imagine how truly glorious this is going to be.

Now look at how Paul concluded his prayer, and then I am finished: ". . . according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."

When people who do not know the Lord hear us speaking of the Lord in terms that I have used this morning, they could easily feel that we are boasting. Christ lives in me, and I am in Him. Christ lives in you, if you know the Lord, and you are in Him. But, if they realized all of the greatness and the holy majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ, they would be even more amazed that we would make such claims. But we are not boasting. We certainly should not be boasting because Paul reminded us here in his prayer that all that we are, or all that we ever will be, is traceable to the grace of God, and to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. This means that you and I do not deserve a bit of the praise. If God gave us what we deserve, we would not be here this morning. He not only does not give us what we deserve, but He gives us what we could never deserve. So, as Paul prayed, he was obviously reminding the believers in Thessalonica that all of the blessings that they had in Christ, blessings that they had and could never lose because you can never lose Him, were theirs only because of His grace, all because of His mercy, and all because of His love for us. And we know that His love for us will never change.

This is what salvation is. It is a very short prayer, isn't it? But, oh, what wonderful truth is here! There is so much to be done in all of us before God has fulfilled all of His good pleasure in us. But thank God someday the work is going to be finished. God will be glorified in us, and the Lord Jesus will be glorified in us. Then we will understand as never before how marvelous the grace of our God is.

Paul could rejoice because of the progress that was made in the lives of those Thessalonian believers, but there was still so much to be done in their lives that he was continuing to pray for them. You know, there is nothing more wonderful for us to see in each other than the evidence of what God is doing in our lives to make us what He wants us to be.

Conclusion

Before we leave this prayer today, I want to point out something regarding the context which I believe is very significant. The context of any verse or verses in the Bible, has to do with the verses which precede it, and those which follow it. The last part of chapter one in 1 Thessalonians has to do with the coming of the Lord in glory, and the judgment which will take place at that time. The first verses of chapter two have to do also with the coming of the Lord, but for the Church, and "our gathering together unto Him." So the context of this prayer is a strong emphasis on the coming of the Lord. "Wherefore" in chapter one and verse twelve points backward. The "now we beseech you" of chapter two and verse one, points ahead. And so we see that Paul's prayer for the people of God had to do with what is going to happen to them when the Lord comes, and indicates an urgency as to how we should pray in the light of the return of the Lord, and

where our interest should be. If we believe in the coming of the Lord, our faith will be characterized by a greater desire for personal holiness. See 2 Peter 3:11 and 1 John 3:3. And so we will not only be praying about our own sanctification, but also for the sanctification of all of our brothers and sisters in the family of God. And along with that will come a greater burden for the salvation of those who are not ready for the Lord to come because they are not saved.

It may be that there are some here this morning who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ. That word "grace" is a word which gives hope for everybody. According to Paul, he was the chief of sinners, and the grace of God was sufficient for him. Thank God we have the privilege this morning of proclaiming the good news of salvation, the Gospel of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. "Though He was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). The invitation is extended to all. The Lord said, "Come unto Me." He invited all to come to salvation. I say to you this morning on the authority of the Word of God that whosoever believes in Him shall be saved. He is the only One Who can save you. I encourage you, I urge you, to trust the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior even before you leave this place today. May God graciously grant you true repentance of heart and faith in His Son that you may be saved.