

FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

L. Dwight Custis

Please turn to 2 Thessalonians 3.

For our visitors, let me say, as Dr. Lockwood mentioned earlier, that we are considering the prayers of Paul which he has recorded in his epistles in the New Testament. I have been dealing with his prayers in their chronological order, or as closely as we know their order. Since it is generally believed that 1 and 2 Thessalonians were his first two epistles, that is the reason I have started with them. We come to the last chapter of 2 Thessalonians this morning, chapter 3.

I. PAUL'S PRAYER REQUESTS FOR HIMSELF (2 Thess. 3:1-2)

We have seen, as we have looked at the prayers of Paul in 1 Thessalonians, and now in 2 Thessalonians, that the Apostle Paul was very faithful in praying for the believers in the church at Thessalonica. But as we come to the third chapter this morning, we see in the words that open the chapter that Paul wanted the people to pray for him. It was a two-way relationship. He prayed for them, and they were to pray for him. So he said in the first few words of chapter 3, "Finally brethren, pray for us."

He had made the same request in 1 Thessalonians, chapter five, and verse 25. There you will find the same words, "Brethren, pray for us," but without any requests. The unique thing about 2 Thessalonians 3 is that he gave the requests that he wanted them to remember in prayer.

There are several other verses in Paul's epistles in which Paul requested prayer for himself and his co-workers. I want to read those to you this morning. I will not give you the time to look at each one, but maybe you will want to jot down the references so that you can look at them later.

As he was bringing the epistle to the church at Rome to a close, in Romans 15:30-32 we find these words:

- 30 Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me;
- 31 That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judaea; and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints;
- 32 That I may come unto you with joy by the will of God, and may with you be refreshed.

Then, in writing to the church at Corinth in 2 Corinthians 1:9-11, Paul said this:

- 9 But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in

God which raiseth the dead:

10 Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us;

11 Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons, thanks may be given by many on our behalf.

Then, in writing to the church at Ephesus, after Paul concluded that classic passage on our warfare, he said this in Ephesians 6:18-20,

18 Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;

19 And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel,

20 For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

Then we have this appeal for prayer in his letter to the church at Colosse in Colossians 4:2-4,

2 Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving;

3 Withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds:

4 That I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.

If you are like I am, and believe that Paul wrote the Book of Hebrews, then we can include what we find in Hebrews 13:18 and 19 where we read:

18 Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly.

19 But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner.

You can see from all these passages that it was not unusual at all for the Apostle Paul to request prayer from the people of God whenever he had contact with them. We are inclined to put men like Paul up on a pedestal and feel that he was beyond the need for prayer. But he wasn't. So it is very important for us to see this. They prayed for the people of God, speaking of the apostles, but they wanted the people of God to pray for them. They really believed that they would see greater blessing with the prayers of the saints than they would without the prayers of the saints.

In applying this to the Lord's work today, we can see that pastors, elders, and deacons, should pray for their people. But we also see that you as the Lord's people need to be faithful in upholding your spiritual leaders in prayer. The one is just as important as the other. Missionaries need prayer support, but they also have a responsibility to pray for those who pray for them. This is why I have entitled my message for today "Fellowship in Prayer." Not everyone can give money. No one can give as much as he would like to give. But we can all pray, and we all need to pray. If we could only see how vital this is in the work of the Lord, we would all be spending more time in prayer than we do. I hope these Scriptures which I have read to you which emphasize the importance of prayer will be used by the Holy Spirit to cause all of us to give more time to praying for each other.

In this final chapter of 2 Thessalonians we have examples of both kinds of prayer, that is, the praying that Paul wanted the people to do for him and the praying that he said he was doing for them. You can see in the first two verses how Paul wanted them to pray for him. But notice that he was speaking in the plural, "Pray for us." So I take it that he meant that he wanted the Thessalonian believers to pray for Silas and

Timothy as well as for him. Let me read those two verses again:

1 Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you:

2 And that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith.

Then, if you have noticed my text in the Tableau, you have seen that I have also given verses 5, 16, and 18, because these are the verses which tell us how Paul was praying for them. Verse 5 says, "And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ." Then in verse 16 we read, "Now the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always by all means. The Lord be with you all." Then in the last verse, verse 18, Paul wrote, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen."

I am going to attempt to deal with all these verses this morning, hoping that the Holy Spirit will impress even more upon us the importance of our praying.

If 1 and 2 Thessalonians were written from Corinth as many believe they were, then the requests that we have in 2 Thessalonians 2, verses 1 and 2, are requests for the work in Corinth, for the church in Corinth. We know, especially from 1 Corinthians, that the church in Corinth was plagued with all kinds of serious problems – so many problems, in fact, that it is a wonder that the church survived at all. Paul felt the need to be supported in that ministry. It is interesting to think of his requests in the light of the situation there in Corinth. "Pray that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you: and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith."

"Finally" is how the chapter begins. Paul has been criticized because he said, "finally," and then did not conclude as fast as people may have thought that he would. That is probably one of the sins of preachers when they say they are coming to a conclusion and then they do not conclude. But, in Paul's defense, let me say that this is a word of emphasis. It really meant that he was moving from one point to another which he wanted them to pay particular attention to. We could just as accurately translate it with the word "furthermore." It was obviously designed to attract their attention. It is the translation of two Greek words in the original. He was about to tell them something special that he wanted them to do, and he was expressing it as a really urgent request.

His request for himself falls into two categories. It is interesting, isn't it, that he did not ask for prayer for his health. He did not request prayer for his support. But he was asking them to pray concerning the ministry of the Word and the blessing that they needed to see in Corinth on the ministry of the Word. Then he added a request concerning the opposition that they were facing. Everywhere Paul went, everywhere the apostles went, everywhere the Gospel was preached, there was always opposition. There were always people who did not want to hear the Gospel, nor did they want anyone else to hear it.

Let's look at his request regarding the Word. You will notice that it is a twofold request: First, "that the Word of the Lord may have free course." If your Bible uses italics, the word "free" in italics. This means that that word is not in the original, but has been added by the translators to clarify the meaning of the verse. But by "free course" he was asking the church to pray that the Word would advance rapidly, and not be hindered in any way. The second part of the request is that the Thessalonians would pray that the Word of the Lord would "be glorified." I will explain what that means in a moment.

The word "course" is a word which was commonly used in racing events. It is actually sometimes translated "run." The picture here is of a race track. But here it is the Word that is doing the running. Paul's request was that they would pray that the Lord would remove every obstacle that would stand in the way of the ministry of the Word. Paul was asking them to pray that the Word would run without anything getting in its way, that the Word would have "free course." While Paul speaks of himself and Silas and Timothy as runners in a race, they were racing against time to carry the Word of God to the Corinthians. He was anxious to see all of the obstacles removed so that the Word would be blessed like it had been blessed in the city of Thessalonica. They had seen an amazing work in Thessalonica. So Paul was sending word back to Thessalonica from Corinth and saying, in so many words, "I would love to see in Corinth what we saw in Thessalonica. You join with us in prayer that that is what will happen."

What did he mean "that the word would be glorified"? I hope our recent studies on the glory of Christ will help us in getting Paul's meaning here.

For the Word to be glorified means that people would accept the Word of God as it is, the Word of God.

Now, turn back again to 1 Thessalonians and you will see what Paul had in mind when he gave this request. Look with me at 1 Thessalonians 2:13. This was one of the prayers that we considered a few weeks ago where Paul wrote,

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."

There were many places where the Word of God had been received as though it had been just the word of men. People had been inclined to say that what Paul preached was just his opinion, his philosophy, just Paul's idea about God. But Paul had rejoiced in the fact that in Thessalonica they received it as the Word of God, which it really is, the Word of God. As he wrote back to them from Corinth, he said, "You be praying that as the Word was received in Thessalonica, these people here will receive it as it is the Word of God also, and that the Word would be glorified among them." Whenever the Word is received as the Word of God, the Word of God is glorified because that is what the Word is. It is the Word of God. So that was the burden of his prayer: Paul wanted them to pray that the Lord will remove every obstacle, that there will be a swift ministry of the Word, and that by the people's reception of the Word in Corinth, they would glorify the Word by receiving it as the Word of God.

In verse 2 of 1 Thessalonians 3, Paul added a second major request to his prayer. It was that they, the Thessalonians, would pray that he, Paul, as well as Silas and Timothy, "would be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men." The idea here in the word "unreasonable" is that they were *out of place, did not know what they were talking about, and antagonistic*. This word is used four times in the NT, and in all of the other three times it is translated, *amiss*. It means that they really had no argument. They were just there to cause trouble, but that they didn't know that they were talking about. Paul said also that they were "wicked." They were bent on causing evil to the ministry of the Word. The effect of their work was harmful to the ministry of the Gospel. But we ought to know that God does not work in every city the same way. God does not work in every church in the same way. God does not work in every generation in the same way. We are not seeing in our generation the work of the Lord being fruitful in any way like it has been seen in past generations. Often when the Lord works, the work progresses very slowly. Sometimes the work moves easily, as it did in Thessalonica. But it was different in Corinth when Paul went there. Paul

knew how God could work if He chose to work, and that is the reason he was asking for the believers in Thessalonica to pray.

He wanted the believers in Thessalonica to pray that those wicked men who were opposed to the Gospel would be restrained. Paul wanted to be delivered from them. And he explained why. It was because "all men have not faith," or, as the Greek text says, "all men have not the faith."

It would be wonderful, wouldn't it, if we lived in a world where everybody believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, where we did not have any opposition, but where people would flock to hear the Word of God. However, that is not the kind of world that we live in. So Paul was asking them to pray concerning the ministry of the Word and concerning their deliverance from these who would oppose the ministry of the Word. He really wanted to see the blessing of God upon the work there in Corinth.

At that point Paul spoke about some of the ways in which he was praying for the believers in Thessalonica. Basically here in 2 Thessalonians 3 there are three requests. In verse 5 he said, "The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ." Notice a different emphasis in each one. In verse 16 he said, "Now the Lord of peace himself give you peace always by all means. The Lord be with you all." Then in verse 18 we read his final request: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." Love and peace and grace are the burdens of his prayer for the work there in Thessalonica.

II. PAUL'S PRAYERS FOR THE BELIEVERS IN THESSALONICA (2 Thess. 3:5, 16, 18).

As you think about these requests, they certainly could be pastoral prayers. Every believer in every church needs someone to be praying these prayers for them. This is what we need to be praying for each other: that the Lord would direct their hearts into the love of God, that He would give them peace by all means, and that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ would be with them.

If we relate to ourselves what the Apostle Paul had just been saying about how he was praying for the believers in Thessalonica, he did so not because he had confidence in them. If that had been the case, he would not have needed to pray for them. But instead he said back in verse 4, "And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that ye both do and will do the things which we command you." He was confident that the Lord would burden them to pray for the work in Corinth as he had just asked them to do. Our confidence must always be in the Lord first, and through the Lord we can have confidence in each other.

Now let us go back to verse 5. Why would Paul include such a request here?

I do not profess to have the complete answer to that question, but it seems that Paul was suggesting that the only way that the Thessalonians would be faithful in prayer was through a greater understanding of the love of God. When we understand the love of God in a greater way, there is always a corresponding increase in our love for Him. The more we know about God's love, the more we are going to love Him in return. The strongest way for us to be kept faithful is right here: Knowing more of His love and experiencing a greater love for Him.

Paul's prayer indicated that this was not something that the Thessalonians could do for themselves. The Lord had to do it. "The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and the patient waiting for Christ." You may remember from our study of the prayers in 1 Thessalonians that Paul used that word "direct"

concerning the possibility that he could get back to Thessalonica. His words were, "The Lord . . . direct our way unto you" (1 Thess. 3:11). I pointed out at that time that the word "direct" suggests the removal of every obstacle that would keep him from coming to them. Here he meant he was praying for the removal of every obstacle that would keep them from loving God more and more. This is the first and great commandment, isn't it, that we love God? Our prayers for each other ought to be motivated by the love of God. It is through understanding His love and coming to love Him more that we are going to be faithful in prayer. And it is through loving the Lord more that we are going to see a greater measure of blessing on our lives, as well as a greater measure of blessing on the work of the Lord.

What are some of the obstacles that stand in the way of our loving God?

Well, you know that every day we are involved in the world. We live in an ungodly world. We are never pointed to the love of God by the world. The world is satisfied to live without any attention given to God Himself. It is so easy for us living in the world, if we are not careful, to be carried along with the world and its ungodliness. We find that often the love for the world is the thing that stands in the way of our coming to a greater understanding of the love of God. Our refusal to take time for the Word and for prayer, our neglect of meeting with the Lord's people, can easily cause us to forget the Lord. We need to have our priorities right, don't we? We need to pay more attention to the things that are going to get us better acquainted with our God, and cause us to love Him more and more. We need to put the Lord first in our lives, and then to keep Him there.

If we love the Lord, we are going to be waiting expectantly for Him to return as He promised that He would do. That is the reason that the Apostle Paul brings these together. "The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ." This does not mean that you sit down and wait, but do nothing! That is not the idea in what Paul says here. What he meant was that if we love the Lord, and are looking for His return, they would be persevering in a life of obedience to God as they waited for the Lord to return. If we love Him, we want to see Him, don't we? If we love Him, you want to be with Him. Therefore, anything that points you to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ is going to bring great delight to your heart, if day by day God is directing our hearts into the love of God.

Having said that, we come to a passage which suggests that everything was not well in the church at Thessalonica. Things had started out well. They had seen great blessing. Many people had been saved. Those who were saved were growing, but, as is always the case, trouble had arisen. You can see that there were brothers who were walking disorderly. They were not paying attention to the teaching of the Apostle Paul. Paul called it "the tradition," which is another word for doctrine, the doctrine which had been passed down from the apostles. A general unrest that had come into the church. So Paul recognized this and sought to encourage the church. Look at verses 13-15:

13 But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing.

14 And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.

15 Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

You can see that the picture is one of turmoil. The picture is one of unrest. The church was disturbed by those who were not faithful in their lives. So Paul added in verse 16: "Now the Lord of peace himself give you peace always by all means (or, in every place). The Lord be with you all."

It just seems that everywhere you look at the work of the Lord you are reminded of how much we stand in

constant need of the Lord Himself. There are many students of the New Testament epistles who believe that when the reference is made in the epistles to "the Lord," just "the Lord," that the apostles who wrote were writing about the Lord Jesus Christ. When they wanted to refer to "the Father," they said, "the Father," or they spoke of "God." You will notice here in verse 5, the verse that we just completed, he says, "The Lord" (this would indicate the Lord Jesus Christ) direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ." If you follow that through, down in verse 16: "Now the Lord of peace Himself (this would mean the Lord Jesus Christ) "give you peace always by all means. The Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." I think that is exactly what he was saying. The peace that we need is not something that we produce in ourselves. It is a gift which the Lord gives to us, and which the Lord needs to renew every day. You are not up very long in the morning before something happens that is an attack on your peace. As you go through the day, you experience many things that may irritate you. It may be something that somebody says to you, or just some event that takes place. There are any number of things that can happen to threaten our peace.

When the Lord was with His disciples in the Upper Room, he said that He was going to give them peace. In John 14:27 we find these words, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you." You may feel that if you are going to have peace in the world, everything has to be just the way we would like it to be. But things are never that way, are they? But the peace that the Lord gives is a peace that we can enjoy when things are really in turmoil outwardly. As Paul said later in Philippians 4:6, God's peace is a peace that passes our understanding. This means that we have peace when as far as our circumstances are concerned we should not have it.

Leon Morris, who has written an excellent commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians, says that "peace is not just the absence of strife, but it is prosperity in its completest state." That is a good thing for us to remember. We may feel that peace is just simply a lack of turmoil in our hearts. And that is one way of looking at it. But I like that second part of Morris' definition. "It is prosperity in its completest state." It means that God is working in you in a special way. If you and I are enjoying the peace of God this morning, it means that we are prospering spiritually. The word "always" in our text suggests that it not only can be continual, but that it ought to be and should be continual. It is not just something that we experience once in a while. But look at again to see how Paul expressed it: "The Lord of peace himself give you peace always by all means." And, as I suggested, that can mean *in every way*. The Lord gives us peace in all of the changing circumstances of our lives that you and I face from day to day.

In addition to the verse I have already mentioned in ch the Lord spoke about peace when he was with them in the Upper Room, He had another word to say to them about peace. It is recorded in John 16:33,
 These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall
 have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.
 Our peace is in the Lord. Our peace is from the Lord.

"The Lord be with you all," which is the end of this prayer in verse 16 pictures a church and its people in peace, walking in the peace of the Lord. This is true peace. This is lasting peace. But it is peace which can only be found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The third request has to do with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. First, Paul spoke of the Love of God, and then of peace from the Lord of peace, and finally, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Turn back to the last of 1 Thessalonians and you will find these very same words. His last words in 1

Thessalonians 5:28 were, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

It is found twice at the end of the Book of Romans. You will find it also, in practically these same words, in 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon. This is the way the Apostle John concluded the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. You can see it right at the end of your Bible, the last words you have in your Bible, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all."

In Colossians 4:18, Paul shortened it by saying, "Grace be with you." Obviously he meant the grace of our Lord. In 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus you also have it in its shorter form, "Grace be with you." A.T. Robertson says in his commentary on 2 Thessalonians, we have in 2 Corinthians 13:14 the Trinitarian benediction: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen." And so here it is again, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

What does grace mean?

We all know that we are saved by grace. That means that we are saved in spite of the fact that we deserve only the judgment of God. There is not anything in us that would attract the love of God. It is all by grace, But our need for grace did not stop when we first came to know the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. Grace, God's grace, was exercised in our lives to change us from those who are dead in trespasses and sins to those who are alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. This took a tremendous amount of power, power that is traceable to the Cross of Christ. So, whether we are talking about how we are saved, or how we live after we are saved, there is a continual need for the grace of God in our lives to make up for our weaknesses and to meet our needs. In ourselves we are the personification of weakness, aren't we? We so easily give in to temptation. We are so easily influenced by the world. If things do not go right, we can rise up so easily in rebellion against God. Our love for the Lord Jesus Christ is continually fluctuating. These are things that grieve us. What we need is strength, inner strength which can only be found in the Lord Jesus Christ. You never find it any place else. It can be found only in Him. When we recognize our weakness and trust the Lord to make us strong, then we are strong. In fact, as we are told in 2 Corinthians 12:9, God told the Apostle Paul, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." "Grace" and "strength" are used here as synonyms. God's grace is His strength. As long as we feel that we have even some strength in ourselves, we are not going to be trusting the Lord as we should. Trials are designed to show us our weakness so that we will seek our strength in the Lord.

One of the best illustrations, I think, of strength that we have in the Scriptures has to do with God's commission to Joshua after Moses died. He said to him and gave him these amazing promises:

There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee (Joshua 1:5).

There are three wonderful promises: "I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee." On the basis of those promises, the Lord also told Joshua three times to "Be strong and of a good courage" (Joshua 1:6, 7, 9). If a man ever needed strength, it was Joshua. Any support that he could have gotten from Moses was gone. He was in Moses' place. He had the responsibility of leading the people into the Promised Land. The Lord said to him, "Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I swore unto their fathers to give them" (Joshua 1:6). And that was not all. Then the Lord added:

7 Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest (Joshua 1:7).

And even that was not all. After that the Lord said

8 This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success (Joshua 1:8).

And yet even all of that was not enough. Adding promise to commandment, the Lord went on to say,

9 Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest" (Joshua 1:9).

This last statement was the source of Joshua's needed grace, or strength: "the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

When you look at that passage, you can see that Joshua's strength came from the presence of the Lord Who was with him. On Joshua's part, that strength came to him from daily meditation on the Word of God by which God's blessing was ministered to him.

The same is true of us. The Lord is our only source of strength, and His strength comes to us as daily we give ourselves to meditation on the His Word. It is not just through reading the Word. That is where it all gets started. But strength comes from reading and meditating on the Word.

May our meditation on Paul's prayers cause us to pray as he prayed that we may experience the blessing of the Lord as Paul experienced it, and as Joshua did long before Paul's day.

Paul concluded by saying, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen."

You know, a prayer does not have to be a long prayer to be a powerful prayer. When you pray, "the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ," and then add to it, "now the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always by all means," and then conclude with, "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen," you have said all that needs to be said. Love and peace and grace are sufficient for the life of any child of God, to enable him, or her, to live in a way that will both glorify God and see His blessing in his life, or her life, as the case may be.