

A Pastor's Advent Prayer

by Mark Jarvinen

From his NT writings, we know Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, as a missionary extraordinaire. But in today's text we gain insight into Paul, the pastor, who had not only planted the congregation in Thessalonica, but also had suffered and undergone times of testing and persecution with them, until his departure to Greece to spread the gospel there. From Athens, Paul sent his protégé, Timothy, back to Thessalonica, to strengthen and encourage the believers there, during the persecution that continued to beset them. Timothy brought back an encouraging report to Paul about the faith and love of the Thessalonians that continued to flourish even in the apostle's absence. This positive report prompted Paul to write to them a letter, including the pastoral prayer recorded in **I Thessalonians 3:9-13**, which is also applicable to us as we enter the Advent Season. Paul writes:

9 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? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. 11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. – I Thess. 3:9-13

I. IT'S A PRAYER OF JOYFUL THANKS (v. 9).

“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?”

Paul is obviously thankful to God for the joy that Timothy's good report about the Thessalonians' perseverance in the faith had brought to him and his ministry team. Not only were they growing in their faith, in the face of continued persecution, but their fondness for Paul, in spite of his absence, was also evident. Think about it. Paul had left them when the going was tough, to go and preach to others who needed to hear the gospel. Yet, the Thessalonians weren't having a "pity party" over Paul's departure. In fact, in **v. 6**, we learn that Timothy had reported to Paul that the Thessalonians held nothing but **"pleasant memories"** of him and his team and **"long(ed) to see (them)."** Far from falling away, the Thessalonians were thriving in their faith; prompting Paul's thanks to God and joyful spirit.

Here, I'm reminded that every relationship in the world will go through times of testing. In every case, choices are made to stay angry or forgive, to withdraw or engage, to leave or stay. Here we see evidence of the joy and thankfulness that result when people strengthen and support each other in the bonds of Christian love, with a spirit of thanks, even when circumstances are difficult. **What prompts this kind of dynamic to flow in the context of our relationships?** Just saying that it should, because we're Christians, isn't enough. What actually produces love for God and love for others? Not the law! The law only points out what we should do or not do, it has no power to affect change in our lives. **I John 4:19** provides a key truth here; **"We love, because He (Christ) first loved us."** It's only as we become swept up in the radical, unconditional love of God in Christ that the impetus to love others gains traction in our own lives.

Consider Christ with me this morning. He saw that the human race was helplessly drowning in their sins. He saw that they needed a lifeline. He could have ignored our human situation, because we were getting what we deserved, God's wrath for our rebellion. But instead, he dove down into our world of sin, and was born of a woman in a lowly cattle stall. He took on flesh, becoming just like us, except that He was without sin. But He did suffer like we do, ultimately dying on a cross. You could say it this way – **"Jesus drowned in our sin, so we wouldn't have to."** It was this love, this compassion, that saved us from being condemned, and ultimately was that which raised us out of our guilt and shame into a new life. Jesus stepped into our world, and re-established our relationship with God, thereby bringing to life the desire and motivation to love others and become a source of joy and thanksgiving in their lives. This reality releases us from the need to continuously pick out each other's faults and complain about each other's weaknesses. Aware of what Christ has accomplished for us, we're reminded that we're all recipients of God's grace, sharing in Paul's amazing statement: **"I am what I am by the grace of God" (I Corinthians 15:10).**

II. IT'S A PRAYER OF FERVENT COMPASSION. (vv. 10-12).

10Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. 11Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 12May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

It is Paul's fervent prayer that God would "**clear the way**" for him and his team to come to the Thessalonians to see them, in order to strengthen their relational bond, and thereby to build them up, "**to supply what was lacking**" in their faith. We sense Paul's pastoral heart for the Thessalonians, his intense emotional and spiritual heart of compassion for their welfare. It's interesting to note that as positive a report as Paul had received from Timothy about the Thessalonians' growth in the faith; he still wanted to be a catalyst for their further development in the faith.

It's the **NFL football season** these days and I've noticed that leading up to the next game on the schedule, every coach interviewed is working hard to keep their players focused on the game at hand. If their team has won the previous game, the challenge is to keep the team from resting on their laurels. If their team has lost the previous game the coaching challenge is to help players have a short memory and move on. Coaches are all interested in the further development of team chemistry and execution. Similarly, the Apostle Paul, or should I say, **Pastor Paul**, was thrilled by Timothy's good report concerning the Thessalonians, but like a good coach, he wanted to motivate them toward continued growth in Christ. Paul understood that to be that type of catalyst, he would need to build on the relationships that he had established with them earlier. His prayer was for God to "**clear the way**" or "**remove all obstacles**" from his getting to see the Thessalonians.

Now for Paul to think that he and his ministry team could "**supply what is lacking**" in the faith of the Thessalonians sounds at first blush, a bit brash, perhaps even overly self-assured, yes, let's

come right out and say it - downright arrogant. After all, isn't faith a gift from God? Is there something deficient in God's gift of faith? However, allow me to clarify. We mustn't assume that what Paul thought of as "**lacking**" in the Thessalonians was "**the amount of faith**" they possessed. As theologians **Kolb & Arand** remind us:

"Faith itself may be weak or strong, but in both cases any amount of faith makes the Christian completely righteous. Faith may grow and produce more and more fruit, but faith, like a cell with its own DNA, is whole and entire" (The Genius of Luther's Theology, p. 125).

To make this point even more clearly, Luther used **the analogy of a tree**. One could say that whether the tree is small or large, it is an entire tree. So it is with faith. Whether it is weak or strong, faith possesses the complete righteousness of Christ, rendering the person completely righteous in God's sight. **As faith grows, however, and grasps more and more firmly the righteousness of Christ, that possessor of faith doesn't become more and more righteous, but he or she does produce more and more fruit.** Therefore, in our text, Paul's prayer is that he and his ministry team would be afforded the opportunity to teach and assist the Thessalonians in the process of discovering and implementing their gifts for ministry, so that the fruit of their faith, particularly their love, **(v. 12)** might continue to ***"increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else,"*** and help facilitate the further impact of the gospel both in the community of faith and throughout the world.

III. IT'S A PRAYER OF PURPOSEFUL INTERCESSION (v. 13).

13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Notice, based on **v. 13**, that Paul didn't want the Thessalonians just to be new and improved, or good enough to get by, he wanted them to have such strong hearts for God that they would carry on until that final day in which they would stand before Jesus HOLY and BLAMELESS. **What does it mean - to have a strong heart?**

The prophet Ezekiel predicted:

"I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh." (Ezekiel 11:19)

In addition, David wrote:

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Ps 51:17)

It seems strange that in God's sight, a strong heart is one that is undivided in its allegiance, but also, is one that is weak, broken, and made of flesh. **Why is a broken heart so "strong" to God? What does that mean?**

How do people with broken hearts in the realm of human relationships act? Have you ever had that kind of **"broken heart?"** I've only had my heart broken once in the realm of romance, and that was when my fiancé gave me back the ring after two weeks of engagement. That was a humbling blow. It was a time of rejection and weakness for me. More than at any time in my life previously, I

needed to know that I was lovable. People with broken hearts are in a prime position to receive love. I think I've shared with you previously that it eventually turned out well for me, when 4 years later, Martha accepted my offer to wear a diamond ring a second time. ☺ This time for keeps. That said, in the spiritual realm, when we meet God's approach to us with a broken heart – a soft heart – one that is contrite and sorrowful because of our sin, God is then able to make it strong through His love revealed to us in Christ.

He shows us the manger and says, **"this is how much I loved you - enough to become one of you and live the life you could not live, because of your sin!"**

He shows us the cross and says, **"this is how much I loved you! Enough to send my only Son to die for you!"**

He shows us the empty grave and says, **"this is how much I loved you! Enough to allow myself to be buried - only to rise from the dead and leave your sins in the grave."**

That's what Paul wanted the Thessalonians to be - **holy and blameless** - it's what he prayed for. That's what God wants for us as well. He doesn't want scared Christians - fearful of His wrath, waiting for the other shoe to drop, serving slavishly to avert His punishment. God wants confident Christians - ones who know that He loves them. He wants us to confidently say:

"I am holy in God's sight. Jesus Christ has made me blameless - because he lived and died for me. If I were to die tonight, I know I would go to heaven."

This confidence - this strong heart - can only come from the Lord.

CONCLUSION

Why was it so important to Paul that the Thessalonians would be found holy and blameless at the coming of Christ? The answer? So that they would live in the present moment as confident, motivated Christians until the Lord's return.

We as Christians have nothing to fear on the day of Christ's return because we will stand holy and blameless before God in the righteousness of Christ – not on the basis of works of righteousness that we have done, but on the merits of Christ's finished work on our behalf. This motivates us to keep on keeping on until the Lord's return. **That's why this is an Advent text.** Paul wanted Christians to be ready for the coming of Christ and to look forward to it. We live in this world by faith, but our hope is bolstered by the promise of our citizenship in the world to come. So Paul prayed that God would bless his efforts to come to the Thessalonians, in order to bring them encouragement, and also that God might give them strength to carry on as they awaited Christ's second return. Paul's prayer for them is exactly what we need as well as we enter this season of Advent.

A-men.