

1 Thessalonians 3:8-13

November 29, 2015

Pastor P. Martin

Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY

Advent 1

¹ Thessalonians 3:8 Now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 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.

Dear Friends in Christ,

PRAYING THAT OTHERS GET THE BIG BLESSINGS

Cell phones have made us insecure, at least in one way. In the living memory of everyone here who is 25 years or older, we used to go on journeys for a week, or two weeks, and never call a friend or relative, and everyone was OK with that. Anymore, if a loved one goes on a journey and doesn't make contact with us for a full 24 hours, we start chewing our fingernails.

I. Prayer for Others Comes out of Heartfelt Concern

The author of this book of the Bible had been feeling that kind of anxiety for the Thessalonians for weeks or months. He had good reason. Paul had visited and started a church in the city of Thessalonica (yes, it is a strange big name, but that's what the Greeks called it.) People from the previous city where Paul had preached, so hated him that they followed him 80 miles down the road to Thessalonica. There they publicly opposed him. When Paul kept on preaching, they went to the marketplace, gathered up all the agitators they could and started a riot. That night, under cover of darkness, the small group of recent convert Christians hurried Paul and one travelling companion out of the city. He had been in the city only three weeks.

Can you imagine being one of those Thessalonian Christians? You have heard two or three sermons, a few instruction classes, and then the pastor suddenly leaves. You are left by yourselves. Not a single person in the entire congregation has been a Christian for more than a month.

We don't know how the Thessalonians felt, but Paul was beside himself. It had been such a short time. He had wanted to tell them so much, and it ended so quickly. How would their faith survive? Would they stand strong in those difficult circumstances?

After several weeks Paul couldn't stand it. He feared the worst. So he sent a young man named Timothy to the Thessalonians. After a brief visit, Timothy came back to Paul, and the news was...

A man about my age was at a high school football game recently. On an onside kick, the ball took a funny bounce, a hulking 250 pound opponent jumped, caught this man's son right on the chin with the helmet (and you know how when your chin hits something your head reflexively jerks back). It sent him flying, sprawled on the ground, not getting up. What sort of thoughts go through a parent's mind at that moment? The man was very relieved, eventually to see his son get up, slowly, but walking to the sideline under his own strength.

When Timothy came back, that's how Paul felt. There had been some confusions and conflict, but

the Thessalonians stood firm. They remembered Paul and his travelling companions and eagerly waited for their return. Like that football parent seeing his son walking to the sideline, Paul said, ***“Now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord”*** (8). “Now I can stop holding my breath!” And like a parent after a child’s close call, Paul in a mood of celebration and concern immediately starts to do all he can to take care of the Thessalonians. How? With prayer. Every word of our text is a prayer. This is what a Christian prayer for others sounds like. It is a classic intercessory prayer.

By intercessory prayer, we mean prayers about and for other people. It is where you go to God on someone else’s behalf. Remember when you did something really dumb as a child and you made your dad angry, and he had a right to be angry, but your mom talked to your dad and got him to not be so angry with you? What your mom did, that’s called intercession. Intercessory prayer is when we go to God on behalf of other people.

Right there is a good question for us to ask. How often are your prayers about other people? I have no way of knowing, just asking.

Our reading is a classic intercessory prayer. A truly caring intercessory prayer is a concern for other people. It breathes thanksgiving for those people, like when Paul said in verse 9, ***“How can we thank God enough for you?”*** Paul gives thanks for those people as Christians. When you pray for people, first of all, thank God for them. When you have thanked God for them, then you will really pray for them!

II. Prayer for Others Is Concerned about Spiritual Matters

Now we get to the meat of Paul’s prayer. His prayer for them is overwhelmingly about spiritual things. This leads us to ask more questions about our own prayers. It is good to bring all kinds of prayers for others to God. Prayers for the safety of family members travelling; prayers for good weather, for farmers; prayers for kids to do well on standardized tests; prayers for public peace and safety. God tells us to bring all things to him in prayer. And those are all good intercessory prayers, prayers for others.

But Paul’s prayer was almost entirely about spiritual matters. And if you think about it, so was the prayer Jesus taught us to pray. Later in this service when we pray the Lord’s Prayer, pay attention to how much of that prayer is spiritual in nature. If you divide that prayer up into bits—what we call in Catechism class “petitions”—you find that of the seven petitions, one and a half are about earthly concerns, and five and a half are about spiritual concerns. That is almost a four to one ratio. It might be good for us to consider that. More about that spiritual-over-earthly balance in prayer later.

If you have difficulty thinking of spiritual things to pray about, then listen to Paul’s prayer and think about how we can mirror it.

II.A. That Faith Grows

“Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith” (10). ***“Supply what is lacking in your faith.”*** His first concern was that these fellow Christians had a fully informed faith. Now you can say that he is an apostle, a church worker; that praying for people’s spiritual well-being was his job. Okay, I’ll grant you that. But no more than any parent has been entrusted with the spiritual welfare of a child, and each one of us has a spiritual responsibility to the souls of individuals around him.

Paul thought of those people whom he had been able to instruct for less than a month, and he worried for their faith. They surely knew and believed the bedrock principles of being saved by Jesus Christ. But while that is the most important point of our faith, faith guides every moment of our life. Our faith gives us hope in times of bereavement. Faith tells us what to do when we are surrounded by a world which does not share our faith. And while we enjoy and treasure many non-Christians around us, we know that they sometimes put spiritual stumbling blocks before us. We need a faith informed of

how to answer those difficulties and how to witness to our Savior. We need a faith that can set down principles for our lives, principles for everything from what we watch on the television, to a young person's (or not so young person's) search for a spouse, to how we use our money, to how we respond to people in need – all of those are answered rightly when we have a well-informed faith. And that is what Paul wanted so dearly to do – to be God's tool to supply what was needed in the faith of these child-like eager Christians.

The Christian faith is not “prepackaged and complete at conversion” or at any other time in our lives. It isn't an anti-biotic or vitamin, that contains all it requires within itself. Faith is a living, growing thing. It must grow. It is a relationship between us and God. And like all relationships it requires time and effort, and *continued* time and effort or else it is weakening and eventually a dead relationship.

Prayer that we help people grow in faith is a wonderful intercessory prayer!

II.B. That Our Actions Reflect Our Faith

But Paul also realized that God could use other people to strengthen the Thessalonians. Paul also realized that even if he was to come and strengthen them, it still was only God working through his Word that would strengthen them. So he prayed, ***“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else... May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy.”*** His prayer is that somehow, whether through him or through others, God would strengthen their love and holiness. Notice these two things: love and holiness.

Love here, is our bearing toward other people, and holiness is mostly our status before God about his will. Both were a concern for Paul – which is good for us to notice. We tend to emphasize either love or holiness. It's often difficult for us, as people, to balance those two.

The sign of mature Christian faith is when we bring together love and holiness. We should be concerned about our holiness every time we think of God. And we should be concerned about our lovingness whenever we are around people. What better thing to pray for other people, than that they are both holy and loving people – perfect people!

It is the classic both/and, not an either/or. That is why Paul prayed for both when he prayed for these Christians. Let me read again, ***“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else... May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy.”***

II.C. That We Will Be Ready for Jesus' Coming

The reason this is so important – and this is something that goes back to what we said before. What we said before is that spiritual concerns should predominate our prayers, especially our intercessory prayers. The reason that spiritual concerns should be at the front of our prayers and not an afterthought is ***“that you will be... in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”*** (13). It all comes down to what will happen when Jesus comes back again to this earth. All prayers for things of this world, the fruit of those prayers will end at the end of this world. But the fruit of all prayer for spiritual blessings, well, those prayers will bear eternal fruit. Can you imagine that? Eternal fruit—results that last forever!

Looking back to Jesus' first coming, we see that that arrival makes his second coming a day of great promise, a day we look forward to. This is the meaning of advent: how we can continually receive Jesus anew in our hearts, so that when Jesus comes, we will be found worthy of our God. Not with a righteousness and holiness that is our own, ***“but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith”*** (Philippians 3:9).

Let us seek that for others in our prayers for them. Let us seek their spiritual well-being above all. Amen.