

2 Thessalonians 1:3-4, 11-12; 3:16 “Paul’s Second Prayer for the Thessalonians”\*\*

Main Idea: In Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians expressed in 2 Thessalonians, we learn that prayer holds a vital key to the advancement of the gospel of Christ.

I. Paul expressed thankfulness to the Lord for the church (1:3-4).

- A. They had a growing faith.
- B. They had an abounding love.
- C. They had a model reputation.
- D. They exhibited endurance in the face of persecution.

II. Paul expressed petitions to the Lord for the church (1:11-12; 3:16).

A. He prayed with the future in mind (1:11a, 5-10).

- 1. There will be reward for some.
- 2. There will be punishment for others.

B. He prayed with persistence (1:11b).

C. He prayed with purpose (1:11c-12).

- 1. He asked God to do a work *in* the church (11a).
- 2. He asked God to do a work *for* the church (11b).
- 3. He asked God to do a work *through* the church (12).

D. He prayed for their peace (3:16).

- 1. God’s peace doesn’t depend on our circumstances.
- 2. God’s peace depends on God’s presence.

III. Paul expressed his request that the church pray for him (3:1-2).

- A. Ask God to advance the message (1).
- B. Ask God to protect the messenger (2).

The Bottom Line: Prayer holds a vital place in the advancement of the gospel of Christ.

The church moves ahead on its knees. I don’t know where I first heard that perspective, but it’s true. If the church is to make progress in the fulfillment of its mission, if the church is to succeed in making Christ known to lost people and then in making disciples of those who profess faith in Him, if the church is to *move ahead* it will do so *on its knees*.

Listen carefully to the following words which, although written nearly one hundred years ago, speak accurately of our times. Ponder the convicting questions Edward McKendree Bounds posed in his classic book *Purpose in Prayer*:

Are we concerned about the coldness of the church? Do we grieve over the lack of conversions? Does our soul go out to God in midnight cries for the outpouring of His Spirit?"

If not, part of the blame lies at our door. If we do our part, God will do His. Around us is a world lost in sin, above us is a God willing and able to save; it is ours to build the bridge that links heaven and earth, and prayer is the mighty instrument that does the work.<sup>[1]</sup>

Of the Puritan, Richard Baxter, it was said that "he stained his study walls with praying breath." George Whitefield, the great eighteenth century evangelist, is said to have prayed once, "O Lord, give me souls or take my soul." Charles Haddon Spurgeon once remarked, "If any minister can be satisfied without conversions, he shall have no conversions."<sup>[2]</sup>

Dr. J. Wilber Chapman observed, "Revivals are born in prayer." When Wesley prayed, England was revived. When Knox prayed, Scotland was refreshed.<sup>[3]</sup>

Did you realize that prayer holds a vital key to the advancement of the gospel of Christ? Yes, we're called to preach the gospel, but prayer gives the gospel wings to fly.

In our summer series we are studying the prayers of Paul the apostle which he recorded in the epistles he wrote. This morning let's turn our attention to Paul's second prayer for the church in Thessalonica which we'll find tucked away in the second letter he wrote that church. Paul, along with Silas and Timothy, wrote this letter to the church at Thessalonica. The apostle penned this epistle about six months after 1 Thessalonians, in the year A.D. 51 or 52, probably from Corinth. 1 & 2 Thessalonians are two of Paul's earliest God-inspired writings.

I want you to know right up front what we're going to see this morning. In Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians expressed in 2 Thessalonians, we learn that *prayer holds a vital key to the advancement of the gospel of Christ*. As we inspect Paul's prayer in 2 Thessalonians we'll see him expressing three things.

### I. Paul expressed thankfulness to the Lord for the church (1:3-4).

Verse 3 begins, "We ought always to thank God for you." Stop there and think about a question. For what do you thank God? Perhaps you "say grace" before meals and thank Him for the food He's provided. Maybe you thank Him for traveling mercies after a trip. You'll likely thank Him after you get the report from the doctor indicating you or a family member has a clean bill of health. And we ought to thank the Lord for those things.

However, far too often our perspective is greatly limited, and the "thanks" we offer God reveals this. D. A. Carson observes, "By and large, our thanksgiving seems to be tied rather tightly to our material well-being and comfort. The unvarnished truth is that what we most frequently give thanks for betrays what we most highly value. If a large percentage of our thanksgiving is for material prosperity, it is because we value material prosperity proportionately."<sup>[4]</sup>

Now let's listen to Paul's prayer and notice what he expresses thanks for in verses 3-4, "We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring."

Paul said he felt an obligation, a compulsion to thank God for the believers at Thessalonica. Why? He highlights four reasons, four evidences of grace in their lives.

**A. They had a growing faith.** "We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because *your faith is growing more and more.*"

This was a special church to Paul. He first came to Thessalonica, a city of 200,000 people in Macedonia, during his second missionary journey. Acts 17 tells what happened. He preached in the Jewish synagogue for three

consecutive Sabbaths. What was his message to them? Acts 17:2-3 indicates he preached about the suffering and resurrection of Christ, declaring, “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.”

What was the effect of his ministry? Acts 17:4 records that many were saved, but not everyone was impressed. Verse 5 refers to “some bad characters” [the KJV uses the description ‘certain lewd fellows of the baser sort’]. They provoked a mob to force Paul and his associates to leave the city. And that of course meant the young converts were forced to weather their storm without the aid of their spiritual father Paul.

But God was with them. That being the case, the young faith of the Thessalonian believers not only stood the test, but it increased! Paul thanked God for the Thessalonians, first of all, because they had a growing faith. They had a big view of God, and it got bigger every day! Secondly...

**B. They had an abounding love.** Verses 3 again, “We ought always to thank God for you, brothers... because...*the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.*”

These baby Christians loved each other. Love, of course, is to be the trademark for followers of Christ, who said, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples.”

But notice the words “growing” and “increasing.” Faith and love are not static concepts. There's always room for growth and expansion and development.

If you were with us last week this might sound familiar. *Faith* and *love* were two traits that Paul commended the Thessalonians for at the beginning of his first letter (1:3). What's more, in chapter three Paul said he was asking God to give them a *growing faith* and an *abounding love*. Again, that's because although these qualities were in the church, Paul knew there was still room for improvement. Since he wanted their faith in the Lord to become stronger and bigger, and for their love for each other to expand and mature, he made that a prayer request. Now in his second letter he affirms that's been happening. Their faith is growing and their love is increasing, and he commends them for it, all to God's glory.

Now take a closer look at who is exhibiting this abounding love. “We thank God for you, brothers, because the love *every one of you* has for each other is increasing.” Who was showing love? Every one in the church. And for whom? For each other. And it wasn't a stagnant love either, for it was increasing.

To put that into perspective, think about what brings people together in society. It's usually mutual interests, things they share in common, like ambitions, and so on. For instance, perhaps your child is playing on a little league team. If that's the case, you're going to spend a lot of time at the ball field, probably sitting next to other parents and grandparents. You may even develop a sense of camaraderie with those folks, and begin to sit next to the same people at each game. After awhile, a friendship might even begin, a friendship based on something shared, a common interest. The same dynamic appears in the local Lion's Club or ceramic club, or whatever. We can enjoy a certain depth of relationship with folks based on our mutual interests, but it will always be limited.

Now here's what makes the church so unique. As D. A. Carson explains, “It is made up of people who are as varied as can be: rich and poor, learned and unlearned, practical and impractical, sophisticated and unsophisticated, aristocratic and plebeian, disciplined and flighty, intense and carefree, extrovert and introvert—and everything in between. The *only* thing that holds such people together is their shared allegiance to Jesus Christ, their devotion to him, stemming from his indescribable love for them.”<sup>[5]</sup>

**C. They had a model reputation.** Paul states in verse 4, “Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith...” The KJV says, “We ourselves *glory* in you in the churches of God.” Paul could point his finger at the Thessalonian church and say, “There's the way it ought to be. There's a model church.”

Don't miss an important lesson here. There's nothing like praise to spur a person on to further improvement. Parents, praise is one of your most valuable tools. I remember a friend I had in Junior High. He was a gifted runner, a lot faster than me, for sure. But his dad constantly belittled him. I can still hear the cutting jab his dad threw at my friend in my presence, saying in essence, “You think you're good? You're a quitter. You'll never make it.” And he

didn't.

So often children live up to the expectations set before them. So do children of God. That's why encouragement is so important in our families, in our friendships, and certainly in the church.

Whenever Paul had occasion he thanked God and boasted to other believers about the Thessalonian church. That's not because this was a problem free, for there is no such thing. Paul says they were a model church in one particular area...

**D. They exhibited endurance in the face of persecution.** Notice the end of verse 4, "We boast about your perseverance and faith *in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.*" Evidently the hostility didn't let up after Paul left town, but that didn't diminish the enthusiasm of those young believers. They exhibited endurance. By God's grace, they hung tough even though their faith was tested again and again by opponents of the gospel.

They exhibited *endurance*. Now there's a rare trait these days. We experience resistance and tend to conclude, "I must be doing something *wrong.*" The Thessalonians understood that the resistance they faced was to be expected, and that's because Paul told them ahead of time it would be so.

That was part of Paul's "Christianity 101" curriculum whenever he started a new church. For instance in Acts 14:21-22 we're told, "They [Paul and Barnabas] preached the good news in that city [Derbe] and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,' they said."

I'm not sure we do enough *warning* with young believers, not to mention with prospective believers. "It's going to be *hard,*" Paul told his spiritual children. "There will be *many hardships.* But it will be worth it, for we're going to enter the kingdom of God."

The church in Thessalonica sounds like a pretty good church then, doesn't it? They had a growing faith, an abounding love, a model reputation, and they exhibited endurance in the face of persecution. The question is, how do you pray for a church like that? Let's take a look at how Paul prayed for them. First, he expressed thankfulness. Next...

## II. Paul expressed petitions to the Lord for the church (1:11-12; 3:16).

Drop down to verse 11 where the petitions actually start. Verse 11 begins, "With this in mind we constantly pray for you." With what in mind? Paul said he prayed for his friends in Thessalonica with something in mind. What was it? We must go back to what he just said in verses 5-10, and when we do we discover that...

**A. He prayed with the future in mind (1:11a, 5-10).** Specifically, he prayed with a particular future event in mind, one that provides all the incentive we might need to hang in there, no matter how fierce the persecution might become. Listen to verses 5-10:

"All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you."

And then verse 11 begins, "With *this* in mind, we constantly pray for you." Beloved, Paul knew that two things are coming in the future, and these two things should drastically shape the way we pray. Jesus Christ is going to be revealed from heaven with blazing fire, and when He is...

1. *There will be reward for some.* But on the other hand...

2. *There will be punishment for others.*

Who will experience the reward? *You* will, Paul says in verse 5 to the believers in Thessalonica. You who know Christ as Savior will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are now suffering.

For all others there will be punishment. Who will Christ punish? Verse 8 again, “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” And what will be their punishment? Verse 9—“They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.”

If this evening on CNN you heard that NASA scientists had just discovered that a massive comet was heading directly towards North America, one that would smash into the planet, causing major destruction, and if the scientists said that the only unknown was the timing of the comet’s arrival, indicating it may hit this week or perhaps a year from now, or maybe longer, would that knowledge affect the way you lived?

Well, know this. A future event is coming that will change life on planet earth far more than any massive comet, and the only unknown is *when*. Jesus Christ is coming again to earth, and when He does there will be reward for some—for those who have come to know Him as Savior—and there will be punishment for others—for all who have refused to believe and obey His gospel. If we really believe that this event is coming in the future, will it affect the way we pray now? It did for Paul. “With *this* in mind, we constantly pray for you.”

Before we look at *what* Paul prayed, please ponder for a moment what those who do not know Christ are facing. Verse 9 says they will be “punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord.”

“Some people think of hell,” writes D. A. Carson, “as a place where sinners will be crying out for another chance, begging for opportunity to repent, with God somehow taking on a ‘tough guy’ stance and declaring, ‘Sorry. You had your chance. Too late.’ But the reality is infinitely more sobering. There is no evidence anywhere in the Bible that there is any repentance in hell. The biblical pictures suggest that evil and self-centeredness persist and persist—and so does the judgment. Men and women wantonly refuse to acknowledge God as God; they will not confess his essential rightness; they will not own his just requirements; they will not give up their perpetual desire to be the center of the universe; they will not accept that they are guilty of rebellion; they will not accept forgiveness on the ground that God himself makes provision for sinners in the sacrifice of his own Son... [And so, as verse 9 declares] ‘They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.’”<sup>[6]</sup>

Beloved, that will be the fate of those who reject Christ. And knowing that ought to affect the way we who know Christ pray! Now let’s break apart the apostle’s prayer and see how the future affected the way he prayed in the present.

**B. He prayed with persistence (1:11b).** “We constantly pray for you.” It’s always a good thing to practice what you preach! Remember what Paul commanded the Thessalonians about prayer in his first letter? He told them in 1 Thes. 5:17, “Pray without ceasing.” And that’s what he did. He prayed *pantote*, always, at all times.<sup>[7]</sup> Listen again to E. M. Bounds, from *Purpose in Prayer*:

One of Satan’s wiliest tricks is to destroy the best by the good. Business and other duties are good, but we are so filled with these that they crowd out and destroy the best. Prayer holds the citadel for God, and if Satan can by any means weaken prayer he is a gainer so far, and when prayer is dead the citadel is taken. We must keep prayer as the faithful sentinel keeps guard, with sleepless vigilance. We must not keep it half-starved and feeble as a baby, but we must keep it in giant strength. Our prayer-chamber should have our freshest strength, our calmest time, its hours unfettered, without obtrusion, without haste. Private place and plenty of time are the life of prayer. To kneel upon our knees three times a day and pray and give thanks before God as we did aforesaid, is the very heart and soul of religion, and makes men, like Daniel, of ‘an excellent spirit,’ (Dan. 5:12), ‘greatly beloved’ (9:23).<sup>[8]</sup>

Paul prayed with the future in mind. He prayed with persistence. What's more...

**C. He prayed with purpose (1:11c-12).** Verse 11—"...we constantly pray for you *that...*" Biblical praying is purposeful praying. We're not praying biblically when we mindlessly offer God 'pat' formulas or canned recitations. We're not praying biblically when we're scraping the milky way with impressive sounding, religious jargon.

Paul prayed with purpose. Let's notice three specific requests he laid before the Lord.

1. *He asked God to do a work in the church (11a).* "That our God may count you worthy of His [KJV 'this'] calling." What does that mean? The 'calling of God' is a prominent theme with Paul. God's calling refers to God's work to accomplish His redemptive purpose for His chosen ones. Romans 8:30 puts it this way, "And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." When God calls a sinner, God's intent is to declare that sinner righteous (i.e. justify) and ultimately make that sinner righteous (i.e. glorified).

What does Paul mean when he prays that God would count the Thessalonians 'worthy' of His calling? For starters, let's reinforce the biblical truth that *no one* is worthy of the God's call. We are all *unworthy*. Furthermore, Paul's not implying that they might fall away from their status as God's called people.<sup>[9]</sup> That's impossible, as Paul emphasized at the end of his first letter, in 1 Thessalonians 5:24, "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it."

What's Paul's prayer request? Simply put, it's this: "Father, help my friends in Thessalonica to live up to Your calling. They haven't arrived yet. Please continue to do Your mighty work *in* them." (see also Eph. 4:1)

2. *He asked God to do a work for the church (11b).* Notice verse 11 again, "We constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may *fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.*" Notice those two phrases, both indicating that Paul is asking God to accomplish something *for* the church at Thessalonica...

*fulfill every good purpose of yours* [KJV "fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness"] – God places desires in the hearts of His people, desires for His good work to be accomplished. But we lack the means to bring those desires about. God alone can fulfill those purposes. So Paul prayed and asked Him to do so. As well as this...

*and every act prompted by your faith* [KJV "the work of faith with power"] – God's people show they are God's people by actions prompted by their belief in their Saving God. But as with our desires, so with our actions. Unless God provides the wherewithal, our actions will fall short. So again Paul prays. He prays for God's work to be accomplished, first *in* the church, and next *for* the church at Thessalonica.

We need to remember this. God's work isn't over the day He saves us. Sanctification is a process, and Paul prayed about that process for his friends.

But the church's spiritual growth isn't an *end*. It's a *means* to something, hence, Paul's third request...

3. *He asked God to do a work through the church (12).* "We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."

God has a great work He desires to do both *in* us and *for* us. But He also has a great work He wants to accomplish *through* us. Did you catch it? Paul says He desires to "glorify the name of Christ in us."

In our day, "names" have little significance usually. We use names merely to distinguish one person from another. But in Bible times, the name was much more than that. The name summed up the whole character of a person.

When Paul prayed that the name of the Lord Jesus Christ would be glorified in the Thessalonians, here's what he was asking. "Father, I pray that my friends will live such lives of virtue that glory will be given to the One responsible for that virtue."

To glorify means “to make weighty.” Did you realize that we can add weight to the reputation of Christ? Yes, and we can also take away weight, by the way we live. Our lives can either cause other people to be impressed with Christ, or distracted from Christ.

How can our lives truly reflect Christ? Only by grace, says Paul at the end of verse 12, “according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Ponder the fact that Paul had *purpose* when he prayed. He asked God to do a great work *in, for, and through* the Thessalonians. The persecution was still happening, but Paul didn’t go into a defensive mode. The gospel must still advance. And the gospel can still advance, even when the enemies of the church are breathing fire against it, because victorious power is still available for the asking.

Is this the kind of praying you do for your family members and friends? Are these the kind of requests you are bringing to God in their behalf? If not, could it not be an indication that your priorities are out of whack? Again, I’m indebted to D. A. Carson, seminary professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, who expands this thought with an illustration:

“Many of us have had the experience of asking a parent, ‘How are your children doing?’ only to get an answer like this: ‘Oh, Johnny’s doing very well now. His career as a research physicist has really taken off. He’s the youngest person in his company to have been appointed to the board. And Evelyn is doing very well, too. She’s into computer programming and is already the head of her section.

‘And how are they doing spiritually?’

A long pause.

‘I’m afraid they’re not really walking with the Lord at the moment. But we’re hoping they’ll come back some day.’”

And then Carson offers this probing explanation:

“Of course, the initial response of such parents may be a reflection of nothing more than privacy, a quiet and loyal concern not to disparage any family members. But too often it reflects warped priorities. I have had parents, ostensibly Christian parents, rage at me because they thought I had influenced their bright children to train for ministry, perhaps for missionary service. Others are joyous over their children’s material prosperity and not terribly concerned over their children’s utter indifference to the God who made them.

How will these values appear thirty years or forty billion years from now? From eternity’s perspective, what should be the primary things for which we should pray for our children, for ourselves, for our fellow believers?”<sup>[10]</sup>

To see Paul’s final petition we must go to the end of his letter. What does a church undergoing persecution need? It’s what Paul prayed for...

**D. He prayed for their peace (3:16).** Notice 3:16, “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.” Please notice that...

1. *God’s peace doesn’t depend on our circumstances.* May the Lord of peace give you his peace *at all times*, says Paul, and *in every way*. If God’s peace doesn’t depend on circumstances, what does it depend on?

2. *God’s peace depends on God’s presence.* “The Lord be *with you all*.”

So there’s what Paul prayed for his friends in Thessalonica. He expressed *thankfulness* to the Lord in their behalf, and *petitions*. He was convinced that his prayers could have a vital impact on the advance of the gospel in Thessalonica. But I want you to see something else, a footnote if you will. And that is that Paul needed prayer too. And he asked for it...

### III. Paul expressed his request that the church pray for him (3:1-2).

We find Paul's requests, two of them, in 3:1-2. We would do well to pray them for each other.

**A. Ask God to advance the message (1).** “Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you.”

Paul was a great apostle. But the reason he was great and the reason he had such a great ministry was *not* because of sheer natural ability. It was because he availed himself to supernatural ability.

He needed prayer. He asked for prayer. Not simply for personal comfort or good health, either. He asked for prayer that God would advance the message of the gospel, and use him to do it.

**B. Ask God to protect the messenger (2).** “And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith.”

Paul's not asking for general safety in his traveling and preaching. He has in mind some enemies of the cross. The Thessalonians knew who they were. Perhaps they were the hostile Jewish leaders who ran Paul out of Thessalonica. Whoever they were, Paul knew he was in a spiritual battle and he needed protection. Again, his concern was not so much for himself, as for the spread of the gospel. He knew that God uses messengers to make Christ known, and those messengers need divine help and protection.

As we wrap up our study, I want to take you back to an earlier point. Paul prayed with the future in mind. Because of what he knew was coming, he prayed.

D. A. Carson tells the following story: “In 1952, a young woman by the name of Florence Chadwick stepped off the beach at Catalina Island and into the water, determined to swim to the shore of mainland California . She was already an experienced long-distance swimmer: she was the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways. The weather was foggy and chilly on the day she set out; she could scarcely see the boats that would accompany her. For fifteen hours she swam. She begged to be taken out, but her trainer urged persistence, telling her again and again that she could make it, that the shore was not far away. Physically and emotionally exhausted, she finally just stopped swimming, and she was pulled out. The boats made for the shore, and she discovered it was a mere half-mile away.

“The next day she gave a news conference. What she said, in effect, was this: ‘I do not want to make excuses for myself. I am the one who asked to be pulled out. But I think that if I could have seen the shore I would have made it.’

“Two months later she proved her point. On a bright and clear day, she plunged back into the sea, and swam the distance.”[\[11\]](#)

If we could see the shores of heaven right now, it would affect a lot of things, wouldn't it? Including the way we pray.

### The Bottom Line: Prayer holds a vital place in the advancement of the gospel of Christ.

That being the case, let's spend some time now praying as a church, praying for the advancement of the gospel...in our community...and around the world!



Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] E. M. Bounds, *Power in Prayer*, p. 123.

[2] Taken from E. M. Bounds, p. 122 and p. 114.

[3] Taken from Bounds, p. 117.

[4] D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, p. 41.

[5] D. A. Carson, p. 42.

[6] D. A. Carson, p. 49.

[7] Remember the parable Jesus told about the widow in Luke 18:1-8? “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them *that they should always pray and not give up..*”

[8] E. M. Bounds, *Purpose in Prayer*, p. 87.

[9] Observation by Morris, p. 210.

[10] D. A. Carson, p. 55.

[11] D. A. Carson, p. 61-2.