

Main Idea: By looking at Paul's prayer in 2 Thessalonians, we learn that our prayers ought to be missional in three ways, as was the case with Paul.

- I. Let's express missional thanksgiving for the church (1:3-4).
 - A. The church had a growing faith.
 - B. The church had an abounding love.
 - C. The church had a model reputation.
 - D. The church exhibited endurance in the face of persecution.
- II. Let's express missional petitions for the church (1:11-12; 3:16).
 - A. Paul 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. Paul prayed with persistence (1:11b).
 - C. Paul 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. Paul 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. Let's ask the church to engage in missional pray for us (3:1-2).
 - A. Ask God to advance the message (1).
 - B. Ask God to protect the messenger (2).

The Bottom Line: Prayer is vital to the advancement of the gospel of Christ.

It's all about the mission. Life is all about the mission. *You will be my witnesses*, said Jesus. *Make disciples in all the nations*. Are we to do more than this? Yes. But never less than us, and never anything that would distract from this. We raise families, and work jobs, and play games, and more. But always with the mission on our minds. And if it does not contribute to our mission, we don't do it.

Making disciples of Christ locally and worldwide. That's why we're here. And everything should flow out of the mission.

Missional marriage. Missional parenting. Missional financial planning. Missional retirement. Missional eating and drinking. Missional recreation. Missional everything, including missional praying.

Lord, use this day to advance your mission. Use my work to advance your mission. Use this sickness to advance your mission. Use this money to advance your mission. Use this marriage to advanced your mission. Use all that I am and all that I have to advance your mission.

This is missional praying and it is not natural for sinners, even for redeemed sinners. Yet it's essential for our maximum joy and God's maximum glory as we'll see.

We're going to learn how to pray *missionally* this morning. Please turn in your copy of God's Word to 2 Thessalonians 1 as we continue our series, *Redeemed people pray the Word*. We're inviting Paul to show us how by looking at his recorded prayers chronologically, from earliest to latest. We started last week with his prayer recorded in 1 Thessalonians which he wrote around AD 51. Today we'll examine his prayer in 2

^{**}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 For a previous look at this passage, see the message preached at WBC in 2008.

Thessalonians, which he wrote about six months later. We're going to learn how to pray *missionally*. Let's read our text, ponder it, and then worship Christ at His table together.

Scripture Reading: 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4; 11-12

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

Ponder these convicting questions posed by Edward McKendree Bounds in his classic book *Purpose in Prayer*, published in 1920.

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.²

It was said of the Puritan Richard Baxter that "he stained his study walls with praying breath." George Whitefield, the eighteenth century evangelist, is said to have prayed, "O Lord, give me souls or take my soul." John Knox prayed, "Give me Scotland or I die." Charles Haddon Spurgeon remarked, "If any minister can be satisfied without conversions, he shall have no conversions."³ Dr. J. Wilber Chapman observed, "Revivals are born in prayer."⁴

Dear friends, we have a mission, and by God's design prayer holds a central place in the advancement of our mission. Yes, we're to preach the gospel, but prayer gives the gospel wings to fly.

But not just prayer. *Missional* prayer is needed, the kind we see Paul praying in 2 Thessalonians. As we'll see today, our prayers ought to be missional in three ways.

I. Let's express missional thanksgiving for the church (1:3-4).

Paul, along with Silas and Timothy, wrote this letter about six months after 1 Thessalonians, in AD 51 or 52, probably from Corinth.⁵ Notice verse 3, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you."

Stop there and ponder a question. For what do you thank God? Perhaps you "say grace" before meals to 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 a clean bill of health. And we ought to thank the Lord for those things.

However, our thanks-list tends to be ingrown. As 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."⁶

Paul can help us. Note carefully what Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy expresses thanks for in verses 3-4, "We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so,

² E. M. Bounds, *Power in Prayer*, p. 123.

³ Taken from E. M. Bounds, p. 122 and p. 114.

⁴ Taken from Bounds, p. 117.

⁵ These letters are two of Paul's earliest God-inspired writings.

⁶ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, p. 41.

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

A. The church had a growing faith. "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because *your faith is growing abundantly.*" The NIV says, "*your faith is growing more and more.*"

This was a special church to Paul. He first came to Thessalonica, this 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? According to Acts 17:2-3, 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 pleased. Verse 5 indicates "some bad characters" [the KJV uses the description 'certain lewd fellows of the baser sort'] provoked a mob to force Paul and his associates to leave the city. Consequently, the young believers were forced to face the enemies of the gospel without the guidance of their spiritual father Paul.

But God was with them. And with His help, the young Thessalonian believers not only stood the test, but saw their faith increase! And this thrilled Paul, and he thanked God for it! When you see young believers with a growing faith, the appropriate response is always, "Thank you Father!"

B. The church had an abounding love. Note verse 3 again, "And the love of every one of you for one another is increasing." They were just baby Christians, but they 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 participles, "growing" and "increasing." Faith and love are not static concepts. They are fruit that the Holy Spirit produces (Galatians 5:22-23), Christlike qualities that He intends to grow, develop, and expand in our lives.

If you were with us last week, you'll recall that *faith* and *love* were two traits for which Paul commended the Thessalonians 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*. He did so because although these qualities were in the church, Paul knew there was still room for improvement. And 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 this an ongoing prayer request.

Now in his second letter, written six months later, he affirms that it's happening. Their faith *is* growing and their love *is* increasing, and he commends them for it, all to the glory of the One who has been answering his prayer requests.

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 one other*, he says. Again, it wasn't a stagnant love either, for it was increasing.

Let's 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 people based on our mutual interests. Yet it will always be limited.

This is 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."⁷

Friends, this is what makes the church different from any other organization. We share Christ, and since we do, we have the potential for an abounding love.

C. The church had a model reputation. Paul states in verse 4, "Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God." 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. That's a model church."

We see an important lesson here. There's nothing like affirmation to spur a person on to further improvement. Parents, affirmation is one of your most valuable parenting tools. Affirm the evidences of grace you see in the lives of your children.

I remember a friend I had in Junior High. He was a gifted runner, a lot faster than me. 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 vital 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 church, for there is no such thing. It's because when God does something, when people do something important by His grace, the appropriate response is *affirmation*.

And there was one particular area in which Paul says they excelled as a model church.

D. The church exhibited endurance in the face of persecution. Notice the end of verse 4, "for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring."⁸ Evidently the hostility didn't let up after Paul left town, but that didn't diminish the enthusiasm of these young believers. They persevered, by God's grace, even though their faith was tested again and again by opponents of the gospel.

They exhibited *steadfastness*. The NIV says *endurance*. Unfortunately, far too often we experience resistance and conclude, "I must be doing something *wrong*." The Thessalonians understood that the resistance they faced was to be expected.

How did they know that? Because Paul told them so ahead of time. For Paul, this was part of the "Christianity 101" curriculum he taught whenever he started a new church. For instance, Acts 14:21-22 says, "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."

⁷ D. A. Carson, p. 42.

⁸ NIV "We boast about your perseverance and faith *in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring*."

I'm not sure we do enough *warning* with young believers, not to mention with prospective believers. "If you become a Christ-follower, it's going to be *hard*," Paul told his spiritual children. "There will be *many hardships*. Oh, it will be worth it for sure. The kingdom of God is our destination."

The church in Thessalonica was young, but maturing rapidly. They possessed a growing faith, an abounding love, a model reputation, and they exhibited endurance in the face of persecution. So how do you pray for a church like that? According to Paul, you start with *missional thanksgiving*. Never take for granted the work you see God doing in someone's life. When you see evidence that the mission of Christ is advancing, express thanks for it.

Are you expressing missional thanks for what God is doing at WBC? I am. I see the abundant evidences of your faith and love and endurance, and I thank the Lord for it.

II. Let's express missional petitions for the church (1:11-12; 3:16).

Drop down to verse 11 where the petitions actually begin. "To this end we always pray for you."⁹ To what end? Paul said he prayed for his friends in Thessalonica with an end in mind. What was it? To see it, we must go back to what he just said in verses 5-10, and when we do we'll discover something essential for offering missional petitions.

A. Paul prayed with the future in mind (1:11a, 5-10). People who pray missionally think about the future, specifically, a particular future event. This event provides all the incentive we need both to live boldly and pray missionally, no matter how fierce the persecution might be.

Listen to verses 5-10: "This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

It's at this point that verse 11 begins. "To *this end* we always pray for you." Paul knew that two events are coming in the future, and these two events should drastically shape the way we pray now. The two events will happen when Jesus Christ is revealed from heaven with blazing fire. *There will be reward for some*. But on the other hand, *there will be punishment for others*. Those two outcomes are certain.

Some will experience reward. Who? *You* will, says Paul 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.

All others will experience "the punishment of eternal destruction" (9). We don't talk about punishment much these days. "I don't believe in future punishment," says the Bible critic. "My Jesus is loving."

Yes, Jesus is loving. But love and punishment are not mutually exclusive. Please notice who is going to administer the future punishment. Verse 7 says, "When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with the mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance." Jesus Himself will administer the punishment.

⁹ NIV "With this in mind we constantly pray for you."

And who does it say He will punish? Note the end of verse 8, “On those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”

What will be the punishment be? Verse 9 says, “They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.”

Friends, the One who died for sinners at His first coming will punish unbelieving sinners at His second coming. He’s a loving Savior, yes, and also a holy and just Judge.

Suppose you heard on the evening news that NASA scientists had discovered that a massive comet was heading directly towards North America, one that would smash into our planet causing major destruction. And suppose 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 live now?

Know this. A future event is coming that will change life on planet earth far more than any massive comet. The only unknown to us is *when*. Jesus Christ is coming back to earth. There will be reward for those who have accepted Him as Savior. And there will be punishment for all who have refused to believe and obey His gospel. If we really believe that this future event is coming, should it affect us now? Yes! How?

Here’s a very specific way it affected Paul. “With *this* in mind, we constantly pray for you.” Knowing what’s coming drove Paul to his knees. Before we look at *what* Paul prayed, it behooves us to ponder further the eternal destiny of the unregenerate.

“Some people think of hell,” says 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.’”¹⁰

Oh dear friends, this is the fate of those who enter eternity without Christ. And knowing this ought to affect the way we pray. First, for believers, that we’ll not waste this life on frivolous matters but invest it missionally. And for non-believers too, that God will open their eyes while there’s yet time to be saved.

There’s a second component in offering missional petitions. In addition to praying with the future in mind, we must pray with persistence.

B. Paul prayed with persistence (1:11b). “We constantly pray for you,” says the ESV. “We always pray for you (AV, NIV).”

It’s always a good thing to practice what you preach. Paul did. Remember what Paul commanded the Thessalonians to do at the end of his first letter? In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, he said, “Pray without ceasing.” And that’s precisely what he did. He prayed *pantote*, always, at all times.¹¹ Listen again to E. M. Bounds, from *Purpose in Prayer*:

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, p. 49.

¹¹ 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.*”

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 aforetime, is the very heart and soul of religion, and makes men, like Daniel, of 'an excellent spirit,' (Dan. 5:12), 'greatly beloved' (9:23).¹²

Note again those words. *Private place and plenty of time are the life of prayer.* Such helpful counsel. Some of us have very little margin in our lives as we run from event to event. There's just no time for unhurried missional praying.

Actually, there is time. It's just that we're using it for other things. Good things perhaps. Family things. Things at work, or even church. Yet, if we are neglecting prayer, we are letting the urgent crowd out the important.

Paul had a full schedule, for sure, yet he prioritized the eternal. He prayed with persistence because he had the future on his mind. As well as this.

C. Paul prayed with purpose (1:11c-12). He says in verse 11, "...we constantly pray for you *that...*" Missional praying is purposeful praying. We're not praying missionally when we present our personal agendas to God. Paul prayed with the purpose of God in mind, and we see this in three specific requests in verses 11-12. Paul asked God to do a work **in** the church, **for** the church, and **through** the church.

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 redemptive purpose for His chosen ones. As Paul explains in Romans 8:30, "And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

God's purpose is to rescue and transform a people so that they resemble His Son and will live for the praise of His Son forever. When God calls a sinner, He awakens that sinner out of his spiritual deadness, justifies that sinner (meaning, He declares that sinner to be righteous based on the merit of His Son), and ultimately will allow that sinner to enjoy life with Him forever on a new earth.

This is His calling. What does Paul mean when he prays that God would count the Thessalonians 'worthy' of His calling? For starters, we must remind ourselves that *no one* is worthy of the God's calling. We are all *unworthy*. Furthermore, when Paul prays that God may count you worthy of His calling, he's not implying that the outcome is in question, that they might fall away from their status as God's called people.¹³ That's impossible, as Paul already emphasized at the end of his first letter, saying in 1 Thessalonians 5:24, "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it."

What then is Paul requesting? Simply this. He's asking God to help these young Christians to live in light of what God says is true of them. It's the same language Paul uses in Ephesians 4:1-2. "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love."

¹² E. M. Bounds, *Purpose in Prayer*, p. 87.

¹³ Observation by Morris, p. 210.

In other words, “Father, help my friends in Thessalonica to live up to Your purpose for them. You’ve called them to be holy, but they haven't arrived yet. Please continue to do Your mighty work *in* them.”

Some of you are burdened for your adult children. This would be a good prayer. “Father, help my children, *your* children, to walk worthy of Your calling.”

Paul prayed with a second missional purpose in mind. First, *in* the church.

2. *He asked God to do a work for the church (11b)*. Notice the middle of verse 11 (ESV), “To this end we always pray for you, that our God may...fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power.”¹⁴

Notice those two phrases, both indicating that Paul is asking God to accomplish something *for* the church at Thessalonica. The first? *Fulfill every resolve for good*.¹⁵ God places desires in the hearts of His people desires for His good work to be accomplished. Like inviting your neighbors to your house for an evangelistic Bible study, or investing your summer to make Christ known to children at Scioto Hills camp, or doing ministry in the jail, or at a care center. God gives us the resolve for good.

But we need more than resolve because we lack the means to bring about these good desires. God alone can fulfill these purposes. So Paul prayed and asked Him to do so. And so must we.

The second? *And every work of faith by his power*.¹⁶ God’s people show they are God’s people by actions prompted by their belief in their saving God. But as with our resolves, so with our actions. Unless God provides the wherewithal, our actions fall short. So again, Paul prays. He prays for God’s work to be accomplished, first *in* the church, then *for* the church.

But ministry activity isn’t an *end*. It’s a *means* to something. In, for, and *through*.

3. *He asked God to do a work through the church (12)*. In the ESV, “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.”¹⁷

Yes, God has a great work He desires to do *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, it’s as if he is saying, “Father, please help my friends spend their time and money and energy in ways that will result in glory to the name of Your Son.”

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 people to be impressed with Christ, or distracted from Christ.

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

¹⁴ In the NIV, “We constantly pray for you...that by his power he may *fulfill every good purpose of yours* and *every act prompted by your faith*.”

¹⁵ AV “fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness”

¹⁶ NIV *every act prompted by your faith*; KJV “the work of faith with power”

¹⁷ NIV “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.”

Yes, 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.

This is what missional praying sounds like. Are these the kind of requests we're bringing to God for our family members and friends? Listen again to D. A. Carson:

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 Professor 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?¹⁸

That's a good question for all of us to consider.

To see Paul's final petition, we turn to two passages found later in his letter. He says in 2:16-17, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace,¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word."

Notice that. Comfort your hearts. That's a vital request for sufferers.

And so is this request in 2 Thessalonians 3:5. "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ." This too is what people who are suffering need. They need for God to *direct your hearts to the love of God*.

Don't miss this. What does a church that is facing persecution need? It's what Paul prayed for, not for things to change *out there*, but *inside them*, in their *hearts*.

Those texts provide the backdrop for Paul's final request, which he prays in 3:16.

D. Paul prayed for their peace (3:16). Notice 3:16, "Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all."

Please notice that *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, on what does it depend? *God's peace depends on God's presence*. "The Lord be *with you all*."

So what have we learned from Paul? Two lessons so far. Let's express missional thanksgiving and missional petitions for the church. But there's a third takeaway.

¹⁸ D. A. Carson, p. 55.

III. Let's ask the church to engage in missional prayer for us (3:1-2).

Paul didn't just pray. He *asked* for prayer and we find two of his requests in 3:1-2.

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 had a great ministry was *not* because of natural ability. It was because he availed himself to supernatural ability. This is why he says he needed prayer. This is why he asked for prayer. And it wasn't personal needs that topped his list, either. It was the message. He asked the church to pray 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, possibly the hostile Jewish leaders who ran Paul out of Thessalonica. Whoever they were, Paul knew he was in a spiritual battle and 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.

It's fine to ask for good health and a better job, for our Father loves to give good gifts to His children. But this is what a missional prayer request sounds like. Spread the message, Lord, and protect your messengers. It's your mission that matters most.

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."¹⁹

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

The Bottom Line: Prayer is vital to the advancement of the gospel of Christ.

Song of Response: #462 "*Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us*" (all four verses)

This is a prayer song. We're talking to our Savior. It's a fitting song as we respond to this message, for we're asking our Savior to lead us in the fulfillment of our mission. It's also a fitting song to prepare us to come to the table, for it takes us back to the cross, "Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, Thou has bought us, Thine we are."

Communion

This evening: "*We Are the Household of God*" Ephesians 2 (at Grace Bigelow)

¹⁹ D. A. Carson, p. 61-2.